

# Ali Shariati and the Future of Social Theory

*Religion, Revolution, and the Role  
of the Intellectual*

*Edited by*

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## Ali Shariati and Critical Theory: From Black Affirmation to Red Negation

*Dustin J. Byrd*

The year 2017 not only marks the inauguration of America's first crypto-fascist president, Donald J. Trump, but also marks the anniversary of various watershed moments in the history of humanity, especially man's capacity to revolt against injustice, oppression and the diminishment of the human being to a mere *thing-of-manipulation*, and/or *homo consumens*.<sup>1</sup> Within these conditions, each individual bears little to no value outside of the use-value for those who use and exploit them. Yet, through these explosive *jetztzeit* (now-time) moments of protest and revolution, segments of humanity have shown not only their capacity, but also their willingness, to risk their existence in order to liberate themselves from such oppressive conditions. Five hundred years ago, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, an Eremitic Augustinian monk and professor of Biblical Studies in Wittenberg, Germany, protested against the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church by hammering his 95 *Theses* to the doors of the Wittenberg Castle-Cathedral. Luther stood in protest of the blatant corruption of the Medici successor of St. Peter, Pope Leo x. Although this act was preceded by similar actions by men like Girolamo Savonarola, the rebellious Dominican monk who temporarily ousted the Medici from Florence and fought against the Borgia Pope, Alexander VI, Luther's singular act of protest sparked what would become the Protestant Reformation – a movement that rose up against the nefarious, simony-infested and extremely “worldly” church. In the name of a more-true, and from their perspective “purified” Christianity, Luther rebelled against the mendacity and hypocrisy of the Medieval Catholic Church.

Four hundred years later, in 1917, in the name of a vision of society free from capitalist exploitation and monarchical oppression, the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known by his alias “Lenin,” stormed the stale edifices of state power, demanding “all power to the soviets.” For these Marxist-Leninist proletarians, neither a long-entrenched aristocracy nor the bourgeoisie (as exemplified by the short-lived government of Alexander Kerensky) should rule a nation of peasants and workers, but rather the precariat and proletariat

1 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1–55.

should rule themselves through the democratic worker councils (*soviets*). The Romanov dynasty, which kept themselves in power by systematic oppression and exploitation of the Russian populace, having exploited and appropriated the wealth and labor of their people for centuries, was overthrown by an uprising of the hungry and war-weary masses. Under the slogan, “bread, peace, and land,” they proclaimed that never again would the people grovel at the feet of the wealthy and privileged. Thus, they rejected the stale ideology that the Romanovs were their “natural” masters; the monarchy’s rule was only the result of history – a history which could be overthrown via revolutionary class struggle.

Just fifty years later, in 1967, the revolutionary Commandante Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the Argentinian medical doctor who was instrumental in the overthrow of the American-backed Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959, was executed in Bolivia – an act orchestrated by the Bolivian military government and the Central Intelligence Agency, and captained by the Cuban ex-pat Félix Rodríguez. Still defiant in the face of an expansive imperial power, Che’s last words to his Bolivian executioner were, “Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man.” Indeed, Che’s complete identification with his revolutionary cause, the cause of human emancipation, has forever cemented his defiant image with that of liberation, justice, and the end of capitalist exploitation and imperial tyranny. No face in the West has ever become more associated with the Third World’s struggle against oppression than Che Guevara, and thus his image appears wherever humanity finds itself in a left-wing revolt, as his disobedience to the status quo was his obedience to a vision of a society worthy of all human life.

We in the West are familiar with the names of Martin Luther, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, even if contemporary western society is blissfully unaware of the prophetic and Socratic nuances of their life and work. In many ways, the memory of rebellious individuals like Luther, Lenin and Che, are like phantoms – ghosts with familiar names – somehow lingering around, their presence eerily felt, but thoroughly ignored as they don’t seem to impact the routinized lifeworld of the given market-driven consumer society – the society of *ghafla* (mindlessness/distractedness).

While these names force some of us to recall what we learned (or did not learn) in our all-too-shallow history classes, many revolutionaries who have made enormous impacts on the lives of millions remain completely unfamiliar to those of us in the somnambulant West. Their names are no more familiar to us than the random Uber driver, restaurant server, or bank teller. This, coming from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, is unforgiveable; for if the *freedom of all* is to supplant the *freedom of the few*, which is the current condition of much of the world, then we much understand those same (or

similar) revolutionary forces that animate the struggle for liberation outside of the West. The liberation of the proletariat and precariat in the West is predicated on liberation of those same people outside of the West. Those of us in the western world must begin to cultivate a world-consciousness, which entails leaving behind our occidental-narcissism. As Malcolm X attempted to do, we must become international in scope, so that the cause of liberation can create allies among the entire span of the world's wretched and oppressed.

One such revolutionary we must study is Dr. Ali Shariati, the revolutionary sociologist, intellectual, author and activists who was instrumental in the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Rezā Pahlavi. This American puppet regime was installed by the CIA and MI6 in a coup d'état in 1953, overthrowing the democratically elected socialist Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh. This illegal act of imperial power ushered in one of the most brutal dictatorships in the modern Middle East. Just ten years after the murder of the Che Guevara, in 1977, Ali Shariati's struggle against the "Peacock Throne" came to an abrupt end, as he died under "mysterious circumstances" in a foreign hospital in Southampton, Britain, shortly after he had been released from the Shah's prison.<sup>2</sup> His premature death ended the life of one of the most important modernizers and reformists in Islam – who, by all accounts, was a sincere (and desperately needed) *mujaddid* (renewer of Islam).<sup>3</sup> Unlike those phantom revolutionaries mentioned before, whose names and ideas linger as specters in the western air, Shariati's contribution to the liberation of his country from western dominance, both politically and economically, remains evident even today. Although his face does not adorn the walls of government buildings and the inner-sanctums of personal homes in Iran, as does the images of Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors, the language and ideals of Ali Shariati so fertilized the once stale traditionalism of the Shi'a clerics, that it's hard to fathom modern Shi'a Islam without his revolutionary influence. His impact on the most important of all modern Iranian Shi'a clerics, Ayatollah Khomeini, is undeniable.<sup>4</sup> In many ways, it is through Ayatollah Khomeini, and his appropriation of an Islam saturated with revolutionary class-consciousness, *Red Shi'ism*, that Shariati's influence can still

2 Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*. (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000), 330–370.

3 Ali Rahnama (Ed.), *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*. (London: Zed Books, 2008), Chapter 9.

4 Dustin Byrd, *Ayatollah Khomeini and the Anatomy of the Islamic Revolution in Iran: Towards a Theory of Prophetic Charisma*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011), 77–107.

be witnessed today.<sup>5</sup> Amidst the reign of the Shah, Shariati taught a whole generation that resistance was indeed a fundamental principle within Islam, and that to embody this principle – to disobey the unjust status quo – was not only a revolutionary duty for those seeking national liberation, but an act of religious faith. *To be Muslim is to revolt, and to revolt is to be Muslim.*

### Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to explore Ali Shariati's attempt to recover the revolutionary core of Islam – resurrecting the prophetic, emancipatory and liberational core that once animated the Islam of the 7th and 8th century, which, by the 20th century, had become uninspiring, static, non-dialectical and/or even oppressive, and thus incapable of realizing the very mission it was tasked to do by Muhammad himself: to create the social, political and economic conditions that were worthy of the divine's dearest creation: mankind. This chapter seeks to demonstrate how Ali Shariati's marriage of class-conscious western philosophy – born out of the struggle to emancipate the West from its own class-confinements and abuses of power – and Shi'a Islam, reinvigorated the slumbering core of Prophet Muhammad's religion. With the help of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory of Religion and Society, I will demonstrate that Ali Shariati not only came to agree with the Frankfurt School's *dialectical* approach to religion, which rejected Feuerbach's, Marx's, Lenin's, Freud's and Nietzsche's *abstract negation* of religion, but that he also followed a similar process in regards to western critical philosophy: he engaged in a *determinate negation* of such philosophy, thus delivering its emancipatory potentials to religion. For Shariati, this meant that the "affirmative" Black Shi'ism of the Safavid dynasty was negated in favor of the "negative" Red Shi'ism/Islam of Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, Al-Ḥussein ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Abū Dhār al-Ghifārī. In this sense, Ali Shariati, like the Frankfurt School, created a Critical Theory of Religion, wherein religion struggles not only against secular oppression, but against religious oppression as well. Thus, Shariati's revolutionary Islam will struggle against the degrading idols of modernity just

5 Clerical detractors of Shariati pleaded with Khomeini to condemn Shariati's work as being "unIslamic." However, according to the biographer Ali Rahnama, having read the available works of Shariati, Khomeini refused to be pitted against one of the most influential critics of the Shah, even if he was also critical of the clerical establishment. Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian*, 275.

as the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory of Religion struggles against the idols of neo-liberal capitalism, nationalism, ethno-superiority and all other ideologies that legitimate human oppression. Lastly, unlike the secular Frankfurt School, who translated religious elements into secular philosophy, Ali Shariati consciously did the opposite: he translated secular philosophy into religion. In an era of increased secularization, where many critics of religion expect it to soon come to its end, Shariati's religious approach proved to be more appropriate for the national liberation of 20th century Iran, which still held fast to its Shi'a identity.

### **The Frankfurt School's Critical Theory of Religion: Determinate Negation**

The Frankfurt School for Social Research has long been viewed as a neo-Marxist school of thought, which also has deep roots in the works of Kant, Hegel, Freud and Nietzsche. To their critics, these left-wing Jewish intellectuals of the mid-20th century represent an invasive "cultural Marxism," which is claimed to be responsible for the modern "evils" of multiculturalism, political correctness, and the erosion of the Christian foundations of the West.<sup>6</sup> To their supporters, they are non-conforming intellectuals who questioned the foundational ideologies of capitalism, consumerism and bourgeois democracy. Within their broader critical theory of society, these scholars, including Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm and Leo Löwenthal, developed a critical theory of religion.<sup>7</sup> While their work on religion saturated a variety of their larger works, the development of such constellational thought was pioneered most concretely by the scholar of the second generation of critical theorists, Rudolf J. Siebert. Later, following the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington D.C., religion became a serious subject of inquiry for other philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler and Martha Nussbaum. The Frankfurt School faithfully followed the dialectical logic of the historical materialist Karl Marx, which he learned from his teacher G.W.F. Hegel. While negating, preserving,

6 Although these accusations against the Frankfurt School have had a long life in the West, especially among the "alt-right," they recently motivated one of the worst hate crimes in Europe: the white nationalist Anders Behring Breivik's lone wolf terrorist attack on Oslo and Utøya Island in 2011, which resulted in the deaths of 77 individuals.

7 See Eduardo Mendieta, *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*. New York: Routledge, 2005.



fulfilling and elevating Aristotelian logic, Hegel's dialectical logic attempted to go beyond the realm of the given, the structures of the *world-as-it-is*, offering us insights into the *world-of-becoming* – the *world-as-it-should-be* – beyond the world of appearances and beyond the ideological world of “necessary appearances.”<sup>8</sup> Hegel's metaphysics, philosophy of history and dialectical logic thereby created the intellectual space necessary to imagine a world in which the arc of history is bent towards reedom for all. This dialectical method, which Hegel described as *determinate negation* (*bestimmte negation*), seems perfectly obvious to dialectical philosophers today, but when it was first articulated in his *Science of Logic* (*Wissenschaft der Logik*) in 1816, it proved revolutionary, especially in the hands of the Young Hegelians, including Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. Marx would later turn Hegel “upon his head,” by dialecticizing the left-wing materialism that was becoming increasingly prevalent in his day. Such materialism gave primacy to the material world in history's development and its current state-of-being.

But before there was Marx, there was Hegel's dialectical logic, and in order to better understand the central claim of this argument, that Hegel's dialectical logic is essential for both the Frankfurt School's and Ali Shariati's critical theory of religion, we should examine the relevant passage wherein Hegel articulates his understanding of dialectics. Attempting to explain the nature of *determinate negation*, as opposed to *abstract negation*, Hegel defines his logic as such,

All that is necessary to achieve scientific progress – and it is essential to strive to gain this quite *simple* insight – is the recognition of the logical principle that the negative is just as much positive, or that what is self-contradictory does not resolve itself into a nullity, into abstract nothingness, but essentially only into the negation of its *particular* content, in other words, that such a negation is not all and every negation but the negation of a specific subject matter which resolves itself, and consequently is a specific negation, and therefore the result essentially contains that from which it results; which strictly speaking is a tautology, for otherwise it would be an immediacy, not a result. Because the result, the negation, is a *specific* negation, it has a *content*. It is a fresh Notion but higher and richer than its predecessor; for it is richer by the negation or opposite of

8 I use the word “ideology” or “ideological” in the Marxian sense, as the necessary camouflaging of reality behind statements, systems of thought, political propaganda, etc., meant to conceal the reality of class exploitation, racism, sexism, and the structure of domination by which the powerful continue to dominate the powerless.

the latter, therefore contains it, but also something more, and is the unity of itself and its opposite. It is in this way that the system of Notions as such has to be formed – and has to complete itself in a purely continuous course in which nothing extraneous is introduced.<sup>9</sup>

G.W.F. HEGEL; *Hegel's Science of Logic*, 54.

From this important quote, we have identified the dialectical processes that will animate the Frankfurt School's relationship to religion as well as Shariati's relationship to western philosophy. The Frankfurt School does not *abstractly negate* religion in the same way that their predecessors Feuerbach, Marx, Lenin and Nietzsche did, wherein all of religion is negated into "abstract nothingness," but rather they grasp elements within religion that they wish to preserve, elevate and fulfill within their own secular philosophy, which serves as a "fresh notion" that is "higher and richer than its predecessor." It is the "unity" of the prophetic elements within religion with critical secular philosophy. As such, the Frankfurt School has *determinately negated* religion, or even sublated (*aufheben*) religion, which allows certain semantic and semiotic material to migrate from the depth of the Abrahamic religions, especially Judaism and Christianity, into Critical Theory – an emancipatory process that Shariati will similarly follow but in the opposite direction; philosophy will be determinately negated, or sublated, into critical prophetic religion.<sup>10</sup>

This being the case, it cannot be claimed that these mainly secular philosophers are hostile to religion, unlike some of their immediate predecessors, for if they were, they would engage religion via *abstract negation* – an attempt to cancel religion altogether. On the contrary, they remained open to religion, witnessing the liberational and emancipatory potentials that dwelled just behind its public façade and its historical crimes. Thus, the first generation of the Frankfurt School saw both those elements within religion that aided in man's emancipation as well as those elements that contributed to man's continual enslavement, debasement and oppression. Thus, in his insightful *Notizen*, the first director of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer, gives us his dialectical

9 G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*. Trans. A.V. Miller. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1993), 54. The emphases are in the original.

10 Hegel defines "sublation" as having two meanings, 'on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to. Even "to preserve" includes a negative element, namely, that something is removed from its immediacy and so from an existence which is open to external influence, in order to preserve it. Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved; it has only lost its immediacy but is not on that account annihilated.' See, G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, 107.

definition of religion. He begins with what he determines to be the “good” aspects of religion, which we will later define as being the philosophically and historically *negative* aspects of religion, writing,

What is religion in the good sense? To sustain, not to let reality stifle, the impulse for change, the desire that the spell be broken, that things take the right turn. We have religion where life down to its every gesture is marked by this resolve.<sup>11</sup>

For Horkheimer, “good religion” is the religion that rebels against the reality that stifles the humanity’s longing for a different reality; “good religion” is the religion that preserves and acts upon the “impulse for change” within a world-condition that is unworthy of the dignity of human existence; “good religion” is predicated on the desire to break the spell of the given – the social conditions that foreclose on biophilia in favor of necrophilia; “good religion” longs to unlock the iron cage built by man’s domination of man, man’s domination of nature, man’s exploitation of man, man’s exploitation of nature, and man’s alienation from himself, his fellow man, and his natural surroundings. According to Horkheimer, when religion is saturated with this longing for change, it embodies the original impetus that birthed the historical Abrahamic traditions.

What then is religion in the bad sense? Horkheimer writes,

It [bad religion] is the same impulse but in its perverted form, as affirmation, prophecy, that gilds reality in the very act of castigating it. It is the lie that some earthly or heavenly future gives evil, suffering, horror, a meaning. The lie does not need the cross, it already lives in the ontological concept of transcendence.<sup>12</sup>

Here, one can see where Horkheimer’s critique of religion takes on its dialectical form. First, he identifies those elements within “good religion” that should remain preserved within secular philosophy: the longing for a world without man’s debasement via imperialism, capitalism, racism, sexism and all other forms of oppression and exploitation. Second, he identifies precisely those elements in “bad religion” that must be negated: its affirmation of the status quo, the sophistic appearance of “castigating” the unjust reality while secretly strengthening its already-existing coordinates, and the ideological claim,

11 Max Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926–1931 & 1950–1969*. Trans. Michael Shaw. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 163.

12 Ibid.

which often takes on a metaphysical stature, that unnecessary suffering has an imminent and inherent meaning – thus justifying its existence. What Horkheimer's dialectical definition of religion is articulating here is that religion itself can either be a social force in service to man's liberation, or it can be functionalized as an ideological cover, a legitimization, for man's enslavement, exploitation, debasement. Thus, from the standpoint of the early critical theorists, because religion is in opposition to itself, *religion therefore must oppose religion*; it must fight against its own tendencies to become the handmaiden of the dominant classes – the *mala'* (wealthy aristocrats) and *mutrif* (the insatiate who live in ease and luxury), as Shariati described them. Religion's inner-contradictions, its own inner-logic, impels it to struggle against its tendency to sacrifice its *negativity* (its prophetic or *contra-mundi* elements) at the altar of earthly power, causing it to degenerate into mere *affirmative* ideology. Thus, in order to rescue religion from itself, it must resist its own functionalization as a means to give permanence to social statics.<sup>13</sup>

However, from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, rooted deeply within the western Enlightenment, the idea that religion itself will emancipate itself from its own self-imposed chains is wishful thinking. Western religion, which abandoned, for the most part, its emancipatory potentials in favor of a world-affirming type of “winner” religion (not a “loser” like the battered and abused Jesus on the cross), may have already nailed itself in its own historical coffin. For Critical Theory, the only substantive way to rescue those irreplaceable revolutionary potentials which formed the core of “good religion,” is to forcibly rescue them from their *affirmative*, or “bad” forms; to emancipate those potentials via *determinate negation* of religion as a whole, thus allowing those materials to find new dwellings in secular critical philosophy – the emancipatory language of the modern prophetic voice, especially in the West. As the critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno wrote, ‘nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed; every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane.’<sup>14</sup> From a secular western perspective, those aspects of religion that cannot pass the test of secularization must be left in the ditch of history, for without migration “into the realm of the secular,” such religious language falls upon theologically-deaf ears.

Once rescued from the distorted form of affirmative Judaism and affirmative Christianity, such semantic and semiotic materials congealed within the

13 Ali Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*. Trans. Laleh Bakhtiar. (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 2003), 40, 47, 59.

14 Theodor W. Adorno, “Reason and Revelation” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 136.

Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, serving as important sources of ideology critique. In this way, religion is no longer inhibited by the straightjacket of its historical betrayal of its own emancipatory nature. Through its dialectical negation, preservation and fulfillment, it comes to fertilize and propel critical philosophy to take on the mantle of the prophets, thus becoming "prophetic." Wherein the prophet once was the voice of the divine, the critical philosopher becomes the voice of *al-haqq*, *veritas*, *aletheia*, *emet* (the Truth). Thus, a *determinate negation* of religion releases the revolutionary aspects of religion from the exoskeleton that strangles it, and gives them new life. It is no longer encumbered by the heavy shackles it placed around its own neck throughout the historical process. However, it no longer is religion per se, but rather religion's prophetic spirit that lives on within Hegel's "fresh Notion": a theologically-induced secular philosophy. In this role, critical philosophy serves as the grand inquisitor of the stifling reality produced by capitalist modernity, just as Socrates once questioned the wisdom of the Athenian slave-supported "democratic" state. As it looks to the *present* unjust and unsatisfactory conditions that limit man's flourishing, it interrogates the mendacity of the *past* and prepares for the horrors of neo-fascism(s) sure to come in the *future*.

With the Frankfurt School's *determinate negation* of religion in mind, it is entirely untrue to say that religion has been *abstractly negated* from western civilization, as some of the non-western critics have charged. Even though it appears to be thoroughly secular, it has not abandoned all forms of religious morality and/or ethical considerations: residue of the theological remains within the secular. Thus, Christian care (*caritas*) for the needy has been translated into social solidarity, which manifests itself in universal healthcare and the robust welfare state; the *Imago Dei* (man made in God's image) has been translated into the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; and the idea of *monogenesis* (the idea that all mankind shares common parentage) has been translated into movements against racism, sexism and xenophobia – as all humanity constitutes a single family. While such social policies no longer claim explicit theological justification, they do preserve their genealogical roots in religion.

However, just as Ali Shariati saw that religion fought against religion for the very soul of religion, so too secularity is split within itself and therefore fights against itself. There is a *negative* form of secularity, which has learned from emancipatory religion, rescued and appropriated the prophetic aspects of emancipatory religion, and elevates them in their struggle against all form of social oppression. On the other hand, there is an *affirmative* form of secularity, which like affirmative religion, serves as an apologist for the unjust conditions of the status quo, the given, the *world-as-it-is*. Just as affirmative secularity

abandoned the emancipatory potentials inherent within the original impulse behind the western Enlightenment, which at its beginning was meant to liberate ‘human beings from fear’ and install ‘them as masters’ of his own fate, it has also abandoned any attempt to *determinate negate* the emancipatory potential of revealed religion. Affirmative secularity has rather *abstractly negated* religion precisely because it – whether in its neo-fascist, neoliberal or neoconservative forms – witnesses prophetic forms of religion as viable and potent threats to its class-dominated vision of the world – a Nietzschean vision in which the *übermenschen* of society naturally dominate the *untermenschen* – the *Aristocratic Law of Nature* universalized as a constitutional principle of social organization, or, as expressed in the world of capitalist politics, the neo-liberal utopia realized.<sup>15</sup>

### Ali Shariati as Critical Theory of Religion

In Ali Shariati’s book, *Religion vs. Religion*, he developed an Islamic form of liberation theology, one that has strong resemblance to the Latin American theologians and their struggle against North American imperialism. Applied to Islam, Shariati follows closely the theological orientation of the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, the initiator of Christian Liberation Theology, and brings together a penetrating class analysis with the eschatological and social claims of traditional theology – dragging calcified religion back down to the muck and mire of the oppressed, the wretched, the discarded and the excluded. In what is essentially two lectures, Shariati claims that religion’s primary struggle throughout history has not been between it and non-belief, but rather between what he distinguishes as (1) the “religion of revolution,” and (2) the “religion of legitimation.” To his mind, the antagonism between these two fundamentally different forms of religion have continued to propel history forward, much like Marx’s theory of class struggle. It was only in the modern period, most especially in the 19th century West, that religion had been forced to struggle against those who did not believe in some form of divinity – the atheists.<sup>16</sup> Although the struggle between religion and secularity

15 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. Gunzlin Schmid Noerr. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1; Also see Dustin J. Byrd, *A Critique of Ayn Rand’s Philosophy of Religion: The Gospel According to John Galt*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 51–67, 145–167.

16 Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 21. For Shariati, *kāfirūn* (disbelievers) are not atheists, as even *kāfirūn* believe in some form of divinity. Rather, they attempt to cover up that belief

is the predominant struggle in the West, Shariati demonstrated that the struggle between religion and non-religion is fairly new in the history of mankind, and only came to the rest of the world via European imperialism and the neo-imperialism of neoliberal globalization, which has exported western culture and economics to most of the non-western world. Until modernity, the predominant struggle taking place in the man's civilizations was between *al-muwahhidun* (the unitarians) and *al-mušrikūn* (the polytheists). More specifically, between the prophetic religion of the Jews, Christians and Muslim, against the pagans and idolaters.<sup>17</sup> For Shariati, the religion of Islam, which has *determinately negated*, or *sublated* (*aufheben*), its forebears, i.e. Judaism and Christianity, is the purest form of monotheism – at least as it was formulated and practiced by the Prophet, his companions, and his family.<sup>18</sup> As the purity of monotheism has been crystalized in the Abrahamic faith of Muhammad, Islam stands at the forefront against the modern world's descent into cultural, political and economic idolatry, the materialistic *shirk* (polytheism) of the consumer society, and moral vacuity of nihilism, i.e. *al-Jāhilīyah al-Jadīd* (the new age of ignorance). As such, modern Islam has a revolutionary, emancipatory, and liberational mission that not only has been inherited from the life of Prophet Muhammad (*al-sīra al-Nabawīyya*), but must be, according to Shariati, rediscovered, resurrected and reloaded against the modern backslide into a polytheistic and idolatrous state – especially in the *dar al-Islam*, where *gharbzadegi* (westoxification) has increasingly become entrenched in the family, civil society, and the state.<sup>19</sup> In order for that rejuvenation to occur, one must critically examine the same antagonistic dialectic within Islam that the

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for their own selfish reasons. Additionally, Shariati's understanding of atheism is relatively common, and he seems to accept atheism as simply those who do not believe in any kind of divine being. The philosophical idea that the most concentrated form of theism has been preserved within the theological silence of the atheist – who say nothing about the divine – as if it's apophatic atheism – is missing from his analysis. For the philosopher Ernst Bloch, only the atheist could be a true believer, for it was only in the atheist's theological silence that the divine was not made a mockery of through cataphatic and reified language.

17 Ibid., 23.

18 Ibid., 31.

19 First coined by the Iranian philosopher Ahmad Fardid, the concept of "gharbzadegi" was made popular by Jalal Al-e Ahmad in his 1962 book *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*. This term indicates the non-western person's infatuation, blind acquisition, and submission to all things western, so much so that the individual forgets their own cultural identity and their own history. Whatever is western is irrationally elevated to the status of good; whatever is domestic is denigrated to the status of bad. The person who has been stuck by "occidentosis," has been, in essence, mentally colonized by a foreign entity, and in effect is incapable of critique of that which colonizes them.

Frankfurt School discovered in both Judaism and Christianity: the dialectic between *affirmative* and *negative* religion, and the entrenched struggle between the two. From this vantage point, we see where and how Ali Shariati developed a critical theory of Islam along the same lines of the Frankfurt School's critical theory of Judeo-Christian religion – thus rescuing the most recalcitrant, non-conforming and prophetic form of religion from its priestly penitentiary, returning it to the struggle for a more peaceful, just and reconciled society.

### Restorative Determinate Negation and the Recovery of the Social-Sacred

In terms of Hegel's dialectical logic, the negation of the negative is the positive; the specific content of that which is negated vacates the specific content of that which is preserved, i.e. the positive that remains, thus preserving, elevating and reformulating the positive into a new or "fresh notion." Such logical movement forces that which is negated to resolve itself into nothingness – the dustbin of history. In terms of Ali Shariati's *determinate negation* of the *Black Shi'ism* of the *clerical* Safavid state, he attempts to negate the dynasty's original betrayal of the authentic Islam of the *Prophet*. Their betrayal was their unwise abandonment of the prophetic and messianic nature of Muhammad's *Red* religion of protest for the *Black* religion of worldly affirmation. Thus, they chose to elevate an Islam congruent with the power-structures of the class-stratified given society: the rule of the few over the many. For Shariati, they did not *abstractly negate* Islam, for they could not do so without losing political legitimacy as Muslims rulers. Rather, they abandoned its *geist*; Islam became the ideological cover by which they ruled Muslims *as Muslims in name only*, similar to that of the opportunistic Umayyad clan (*al-'Umayyūn*), whose nepotism births the imperial Umayyad dynasty and split the *ummah* (community) in two. Those *negative* (world-defying) aspects of Islam, which aim at the unraveling of the unjust and exploitative conditions humanity labors under, were revoked in favor of a *religion of affirmation*, i.e. positive religion, or in Shariati parlance, a "religion that legitimates."<sup>20</sup> This religion of faux-harmony seeks to reconcile the victims of society to their victimization instead of elevating consciousness of the unpleasant dissonance of unnecessary suffering. The religion of affirmation deodorizes the putrid stench of class warfare and class domination; the religion of the affirmative "Priest," as opposed to that of the revolting "Prophet," seeks to incorporate more fully those who find themselves the abused of history, on Rome's cross, the torturer's rack, or the impaler's spikes,

20 Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 32–33.



into the harmonizing worldview of the oppressor – the ideology of reified class relations – by which the victims accept their condition as inevitable, natural, or the way it *must* be. In this sense, Ali Shariati's critical theory of religion attempted to turn the clock on history – reversing it to a time when the *zeitgeist* of Muhammad still animated the community of believers. Theoretically, his was a *restorative determinate negation* of Black Shi'ism, which aimed at the recovery of the prophetic *animus* of Red Islam.

The dialectical tension inhibiting the religion of Islam from realizing its *social-sacred* mission, its Janus-faced and seemingly impassible dialectic between the affirmative and the negative, was overcome by Shariati's own *determinate negation* of the Safavid's worldly sublation of Islam to the worldly dictates of the *mala'* and *mutrif*, their power-nexus, and insatiability. Speaking about those Muslims who perverted Islam into an ideology of legitimization, Shariati said,

It is they who guarded and confirmed the wealthy aristocrats (*mala'*) and the insatiable people who live in ease and luxury (*mutrif*), oppression, suppression, exploitation, hardships, discriminations, ignorance and the killing of human talents, throughout history and theses pauses, stagnations and killing of great heroes, the killing of great spirits throughout history; it was they who neutralized all of the benefits which should have been gained from the efforts, *jihad* and struggles of the rightful prophets and the rightful religion in history.<sup>21</sup>

In order for Red Shi'ism/Islam of the Prophet, his companions, his family, and the Muslim "socialist" Abu Dhār al-Ghifārī, to reappear, the historical betrayal of the emancipatory elements of the Prophet's religion, as perpetrated by the Black Shi'ism of monarchical clerics and the hypocrites (*munāfiqun*), which turned Islam from a "good religion" to a "bad religion," had to be reversed. Their *determinate negation* of the prophetic elements of Islam had to be *determinately negated* in order to rescue those prophetic and emancipatory elements. Returning Islam to its rightful place as a religion of emancipation is precisely what Shariati aimed to do in his critical theory of religion.

### Against the Idols – Bilderverbot and Tawhīd

Although Ali Shariati and the first generation of the Frankfurt School came from two different religious traditions, Shi'a Islam and Judaism, they both, in

<sup>21</sup> Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 59.

their attempt to create a critical theory of religion, turned to similar theological concepts: The *Bilderverbot* and *Tawhīd*, as animating notions that oppose the unjust *world-as-it-is*. The *Bilderverbot* is the 2nd Commandment of the Jewish Decalogue. It states,

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I am the Lord your God am a jealous God.<sup>22</sup>

*Tawhīd*, understood in Islam as the radical oneness of the Divine, is described in the *Qurʾān* numerous times, as it is the essential message of the revelation. *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, which is often described as *Sūrat al-Tawhīd*, described the divine (*Allāh*) as such:

Say, 'He, God, is One. God, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself. He begets not; nor was He begotten. And none is like unto him.'<sup>23</sup>

Both of these concepts are intrinsically tied to worldviews that reject the idolization of anything temporal or created: in a phrase – anything *less than the divine*. In both Judaism and Islam, it is commonly understood that the concepts of *Bilderverbot* and *Tawhīd* belong exclusively to the theological realm. However, both Ali Shariati and the Frankfurt School argue that their meaning can be, and should be, and in some cases are originally meant to be, exported into the social sphere, thus deploying them within a social struggle against the already existing society and all its gross disfigurements.

It is evidenced from their own writings on religion that the Frankfurt School does not only root itself in the Enlightenment thought of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, but also in the Hebrew figure of Moses, the emancipatory prophet of the Torah. More specifically, the Critical Theory is anchored in the second commandment found in the Hebrew Bible, the *Bilderverbot*, or "image ban." Take for example Max Horkheimer's 1969 letter to Otto O. Herz of Vienna. In this letter, Horkheimer attempts to explain why the Jewishness of

22 *The Holy Bible*. Deuteronomy 5:8. Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1972), 161.

23 *Al-Qurʾān. Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* 112: 1–4. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Ed.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 1579.

his recently deceased friend and collaborator, Theodor W. Adorno, did not appear in his funeral.<sup>24</sup> Horkheimer writes,

I have a keen understanding of your regret that there was no acknowledgement of his Jewishness at the burial of my friend Adorno. The *external* reasons are obvious. His father was of Jewish heritage. His mother, née Calvelli-Adorno della Piana, and her sister were both Catholics and artists who were important in Adorno's education. Teddie Adorno was baptized a Catholic and confirmed a Protestant due to the influence of a Protestant religion teacher.<sup>25</sup>

From this passage, it appears that the funeral for Adorno was thoroughly Christian or maybe at best nominally Christian. It appears his Jewish heritage was not considered despite the fact that it was his father's ethno-religious heritage. Nevertheless, Horkheimer is attempting to assuage the confusion of Mr. Herz, saying that this was only the "external" façade to Adorno's complicated relation to religion; what was really important about Adorno was his life's work, i.e. Critical Theory. Although it didn't appear in his funeral, what lay at the core of his life's work was thoroughly Jewish. In fact, it was the most radical aspect of all of Judaism. Horkheimer continues,

I am telling you this in order to help you understand the complicated attitude of the decease to religion and to a specific faith. On the other hand, I may say that Critical Theory, which we both developed, has its roots in Judaism. It derives from the idea that *thou shalt make no image of God*.<sup>26</sup>

For the secular skeptic, it may be difficult to accept the idea that the theological prohibition on idolatry lay at the very foundation of Critical Theory. However, from the standpoint of secular philosophy, we must ask a different question: why were these supposedly "neo-Marxist" philosophers harkening back to the biblical account of Moses for their modern struggle against the barbarity of modernity, especially fascism. What kind of conceptual material did Moses provide Critical Theory, especially considering that Critical Theory is a thoroughly modern philosophy – understood to not only be rooted in the

24 Max Horkheimer, *A Life in Letters: Selected Correspondence*. Ed. and Trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 361.

25 Ibid. Emphasis is mine.

26 Ibid. Emphasis is mine.

Enlightenment, but also understood to be that which attempted to rescue and preserve the Enlightenment in the face of its collapse into a new oppressive and totalizing myth?<sup>27</sup> Clearly, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the “image-ban” provided some kind of foundation from which they could build their Critical Theory of Society as well as their Critical Theory of Religion, which is concerned not entirely with theological questions, but rather with social, political and economic questions.

The power of the *Bilderverbot* lies in its *negativity*: its resistance towards anything temporal or created being absolutized into a false-divinity – an idol. Whether it is a nation, a leader, or an ideology, the negativity of the “image-ban” forbids – both religiously and philosophically – the adherent from submitting to anything other than that which creates the created – the a-temporal, the eternal, the ever lasting. The positivity of images, their immanence as reality, is the lie that they are anything other than the creation of man’s own hands or mere nature, and therefore subject to the same decay as the rest of matter. In other words, they are but temporal objects falsely raised to the level of the atemporal – the eternal. When thinking about physical icons, this ban on worshipping the non-divine as if it were the divine seem theologically sound within the context of Abrahamic faiths. In the Bible, Abraham himself was the original idol-destroyer.<sup>28</sup> However, for the Frankfurt School, the anti-idolatry of the *Bilderverbot* has an additional export to the social-realm; nothing in *society* can be falsely elevated to the level of an absolute, to which absolute submission is due. Since this is the case, all things that augment themselves to the level of an absolute, must be rejected, criticized, and deconstructed until they are shown to be what in reality they are: lies parading as Truth. As such, the *Bilderverbot* lies at the heart of the Frankfurt School’s secular ideology critique – for it too brooks no confidence in the claims of anything falsely absolutized.<sup>29</sup>

27 See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*.

28 *Al-Qurʾān*, 21: 51–70.

29 Ali Shariati was well aware of the anti-idolatry of the western Enlightenment. He wrote, “the mission which European intellectuals and seekers of liberation undertook in their struggle with the church, the religion of the Middle Ages in Europe resulted in the liberation of European thought after 1000 years of stagnation. They struggled against this deviated religion and religious deviation, that is, multitheism (*shirk*). They developed a resistance movement against a religion ruled by an arrogant despot who, in the clothes of the Prophet Jesus, rebelled against God’s commands. The mission of theirs was a continuation of that very mission which the divinely-appointed prophets continuously undertook against the reactionary, deviated religion which opposed the people, which

Some may say that the image ban seems to work for the religious, as they are the ones who willingly submit to the unseen divine being. It should be very different for the secular philosopher who does not accept the existence of a divine being and is therefore free to attach his loyalties to whatever humanly-constructed edifice he wishes to. This may be the case for some philosophers, such as the fascist Martin Heidegger and others who absolutized German *blut und boden* and the Führer.<sup>30</sup> However, this is not the case for the Frankfurt School. This is due to two reasons; first, they determinately negated Judaism, thus sublating its image ban into secular philosophy, which they personally and theoretically attached themselves, not only as a singular philosophical principle, but more precisely as a guiding-spirit that animated their entire corpus. In other words, the image ban was translated from its original theological context into philosophy, by which its anti-idolatry negativity continued within secular form – against any form of social, political and/or economic idolatry. Second, since Kant demonstrated reason's limitations, that reason cannot penetrate the *thing-in-itself*, including, and most especially, the divine being – which eludes all positive articulations – the Frankfurt School has remained silent on the existence of the divine. Within that silence, the possibility of the divine remains preserved – for the silence itself is apophatic theology. In a sense, the *mysterium tremendum* that accompanies the totally otherness of the divine within Abrahamic faiths, which renders positive utterances about the divine as being false, untrue, and lies, or at best semblances, is preserved in their Critical Theory. Therefore, they need not be personally committed to the whole of Judaism to embody the negativity of Judaism's *Bilderverbot* in their critical political theory and dialectical religiology.

Turning to Shariati's political-social understanding of Islam's notion of *Tawhīd*, we see something very similar to the Frankfurt School's sublation of Judaism's *Bilderverbot*, albeit in a different direction within a dialectical movement. As I previously mentioned, in his book *Religion vs. Religion*, Shariati reminds his listener that *Tawhīd* (divine oneness) has struggled throughout history with *shirk* (polytheism). However, this struggle has not simply been

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opposed human rights, which legitimates or justifies the position of those who hold the power, wealth and/or means by which to deceive, which stupefies and narcotizes people. The European intellectual did this in order to *destroy all idols* and all signs of the religion of multitheism although they did not explain things in these terms." Emphasis added. See Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 59–60.

30 Victor Farías, *Heidegger and Nazism*. Ed. Joseph Margolis and Tom Rockmore. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.

between two mere theological ideas, but rather this antagonism takes concrete form in the struggle for human emancipation in history. He writes,

This religion of monotheism, while it invites humanity to submit before God, in the same way and for this very reason, *it invites humanity to rebel against anything that is other than He*. Opposed to this, the religion of multitheism [polytheism] or *shirk* invites humanity to rebel against this great Beloved of Existence, before this invitation of Islam to God, who is the meaning of all of existence and the eternal goal of all life, and to rebel against the religion of Islam and [its call to] “surrender.” It terminates automatically in surrender and slavery to hundreds of other powers, to hundreds of other polarizations and forces, where each pole, each power, each class and each group has a god.<sup>31</sup>

For Shariati, the oneness of the divine, which testifies to the oneness of his creation, including the human family, is the foundation by which the believer rejects all forms of idolatry – the absolutization of not only a created thing, but a given social structure, political ideology, etc. In the mid-20th century, the structure that determined the political-economy of Iran was the capitalist system and the neo-liberal imperial power that both supported it and was supported by it, i.e. the United States and their client, the Shah of Iran. The *negativity* inherent within the notion of divine oneness dissolves all attempts to elevate anything in the *dunyā* (world) from proclaiming itself to be the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) – for only the divine being, which can only be articulated adequately in silence or *via negativa*, as in negative theology, can be considered absolute Truth, and thus engender absolute obedience.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, absolute obedience to the divine manifests itself in disobedience to that which contradicts the *tawḥīdic* principle of Islam itself, as Prophet Muhammad’s Islam is understood to be the “perfected religion” that the divine has chosen for mankind.<sup>33</sup> While

31 Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 30.

32 From a traditional Islamic perspective, apophatic (negative) theology becomes preferable to cataphatic (positive) theology when positive theology treads too close to defining the divine within the limits of man’s species language. However, it is also clear that Islam prefers to speak of the divine from within the language of the divine, i.e. the *Qur’ān* itself, in the Arabic language. It is understood that while man’s understanding of the full capacity of divine reality is limited, and that the *full* meaning of the *Qur’ān* escapes even the most knowledgeable of scholars, *Qur’ānic* language is preferable to either apophatic silence or cataphatic distortions.

33 *al-Qur’ān*, 5: 3.

this creates potential *fitnah* (division) within the community of believers, who have no choice but to interpret the *Qur'ān* and the Islamic tradition within the confines and laws of reason, grammar, and logic, even with which errors can be made, it nevertheless secures the believer from conflating the *given* with the *ought*, the *world-as-it-should-be* with the *world-as-it-is*, as well as *dunyā* and *ākhirā* (the hereafter).

For Shariati, the diminishment of *Tawḥīd* to a mere theological category, even as central as it is, does violence to the notion itself. This deflation robs the notion of its social-political and economic elements. In other words, it turns *Tawḥīd* into a category for academic discourse, a subject of theologians (*mutakallimūn*), a simple matter of cognition, rather than a *way-of-being-in-the-world* that is modeled after the praxis of Muhammad, which inevitably includes communicative rationality and *moral-practical* concerns. For Shariati, polytheism is not only a positivistic description of a given theology of multiple gods, but is an active form of religion that justifies, sanctifies and legitimates injustice, exploitation, and continual degradation of humanity. It is an affirmative political-theology of the status quo, the ruling class, the *mala'* and *mutrif*.<sup>34</sup> This is the same critique Muhammad leveled at Mecca's pagan religion and society in the 7th century Arabia; its polytheist theology legitimated its unjust poly-perverse society.

With the dichotomy of *Tawḥīd* and polytheism in mind, Shariati reminds us that the *oneness of humanity* is inextricably tied to the *oneness of the divine*. When the singular concept of the divine is falsely divided, it inevitably legitimates the false – and historically bloody – divisions championed by classism, racism, ethnocentricity, and feelings of racial superiority, etc. He writes,

It is the development of a society based upon a [philosophy] and based upon a social school in which an arrogant leader who rebels against God's Command, who is the legitimizer of discrimination, is destroyed and *replaced by monotheism* which signifies the *unity of society and humanity*.<sup>35</sup>

### Opium Religion

It may come as a surprise to some to hear a deeply religious figure, such as Ali Shariati, agree with the 18th and 19th century Enlightenment philosophers'

<sup>34</sup> Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 32–33.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. Emphasis added.

and Historical Materialists' claim that religion is the "opiate of the masses," a seemingly anti-religion statement, formulated by Marx as such,

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless condition. It is the opium of the people.<sup>36</sup>

While it is clear that Marx sees religion as an epiphenomenon – a result of the material conditions in which the abased masses finds themselves – he does not place the blame for the misery of those masses upon religion per se. He rather sees religion as the sincere expression, sigh and sentiment of genuine suffering: suffering that is translated into consoling thoughts, ideas and practices. For Shariati, the historical materialists' critique of religion, especially the polytheistic religion that is born from the suppression and/or extraction of the prophetic, is correct. Shariati agrees that religion is too often functionalized simply as a narcotic for the masses, assuaging the pain, suffering, and alienation they experience within their lifeworld. In such a functionalized state, religion fails to motivate such suffering individuals to change the coordinates that impose unnecessary suffering upon them – it rather reconciles them to what they perceive as their "fate." Shariati stated unequivocally in *Religion vs. Religion* that Marx's analysis is right, saying that opiate religion helps 'surrender' people 'to their abjectness, difficulties, wretchedness and ignorance, surrender to the static situation which they are obliged to have' and even 'surrender to the disgraceful fate which they and their ancestors were obliged to have and still have – an inner, ideological surrender.'<sup>37</sup> Thus, opium religion has the effect of evaporating the emancipatory potential of the maligned classes, dulling down their willingness to stand upright and "walk tall" in the face of opposition, to use the expression of the theologian-philosopher Ernst Bloch.<sup>38</sup> Such

36 Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1978), 54.

37 Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 35.

38 Jürgen Habermas, *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*. Ed. Peter Dews. (New York: Verso, 1992), 144. Before Marx, Kant opined about the opiate form of religion, writing in his book *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, that "the aim of those who have a clergyman summoned to them at the end of life is normally to find in him a comforter, not on account of their physical sufferings brought on by the last illness or even by the natural fear in the face of death (for on this score death itself, which puts an end to life, can be the comforter) but because of the moral sufferings, the reproaches of their conscience. At such time, however, conscience ought rather to be stirred up and



opiate religion convinces the victims of the status quo to accept their abasement not only because it assuages their suffering, and makes them “feel good,” but also because it comforts them to think that their suffering is the divine’s will, which, no matter how painful, imparts inherent “meaning” into their suffering. Shariati says,

It is the opium of the people so that people find belief in the idea that whatever happens is in God’s hands. It is because of God’s will and any efforts to try and change the situation, to try to improve the life of the people is to oppose God’s will.<sup>39</sup>

Shariati is fully aware that the form of religion that the western Enlightenment itself rebelled against was either (1) the religion that appeared on the outside to be monotheistic but was in reality polytheistic, worshipping the false-gods of wealth, power and prestige, and therefore a betrayal of Christianity’s elevation of the poor, powerless and excluded, or, (2) bourgeois religion – which was merely functionalized in Bourgeois society as a pattern-maintenance system, which serves to integrate the materially impoverished masses into the already-existing society of class domination. In such a society, religion becomes mere *ideology* (false consciousness) – an ideology the bourgeois themselves didn’t – and still don’t – believe in.

Nevertheless, Shariati’s surmises that philosophers such as Marx fail to penetrate the reality of Abrahamic religion: its *dialectical* nature, or, as he states, the ongoing inner-struggle within religion, i.e. the historical conflict between ‘human-based multitheism and divinely based monotheism.’<sup>40</sup> In other words, Marx and his followers failed to adequately differentiate the dialectic of religion: the *positive religion* of the Bourgeois and the *negative religion* of the Prophets, i.e. the priestly religion that legitimates the status quo and the prophetic religion that rebels against the status quo; the “bad religion” of enslavement

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sharpened, in order that whatever good yet to be done, or whatever consequences of past evil still left to be undone (repaired for), will not be neglected, in accordance with the warning, “Agree with thine adversary” (with him who has a legal right against you) “quickly, while thou art in the way with him” (i.e. so long as you still live), “lest he deliver thee to the judge” (after death), etc. But to administer *opium* to conscience instead, as it were, is to be guilty of a crime against the human being himself and against those who survive him, and is totally contrary to the purpose for which such support given to conscience at life’s end can be held necessary.” See Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 93.

39 Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 36–37.

40 Ibid., 60.

and the “good religion” of emancipation. Without an adequate understanding of religion’s dialectical nature, and its struggle against itself, the abstract negation of religion advocated by many materialists would vacate religion from the humanity’s struggle against injustice, poverty and imperialism. When the opium side of religion is universalized, it forecloses on the prophets and the prophetic voices who resist the status quo, thus leaving religion to those who functionalize it for maintaining social statics. Like the first generation of critical theorists, especially Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin and Leo Löwenthal, who weren’t prepared to reject the negativity of the *Bilderverbot*, Ali Shariati was not prepared to abandon the prophetic within religion, the recalcitrant negativity of *Tawhīd*, but rather he attempted to recover, reload, and redeploy it in the struggle for human emancipation, in his case, against the social, political, and economic polytheism of the Shah of Iran.

### Context Matters: Shi’i Iran and the Secular West – Recovery or Sublation

So far I have argued that both the first generation of critical theorists of the Frankfurt School and Ali Shariati attempted to rediscover and recover those negative and prophetic elements of Abrahamic religion and redirected them towards the emancipation of the suffering and oppressed masses. However, there is one important differentiation that should not be overlooked: the *social* and *historical context* in which these two streams of radical thought came to be, i.e. twentieth century Iran and the increasingly secularized modern West. These contexts impinge on the direction in which such emancipatory material is rescued and translated. Specifically, does the recovered material find its home in philosophy or in religion?

As Ali Rahnama’s comprehensive biography *An Islamic Utopian* suggests, Ali Shariati was essentially a modern religious man; he was a man of both reason and Shi’i faith. He lived within a country where religion remained an integral part of the life of the individual, family, and society.<sup>41</sup> In this context, the dominant interpretation of reality and orientation of praxis was safely guarded within the arms of religion, even if much of the Shi’i tradition had capitulated to the demands of the Pahlavi status quo, thus delivering to its adherents an emasculated faith: affirmation via political quietism. Although Iran had gone through the Shah’s so-called “White Revolution” (*Enghelāb-e Sefid*) (1963–1968), which was meant to modernize and westernize Iran, and

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41 Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian*, 1–103.

had consequently been ensnared in the ravages of *gharbzadegi*, the nation was still at its core a religious one.<sup>42</sup> The thin veneer of western secularity, which was strongest amongst the western educated ruling elites, did not penetrate far enough into the spirit of the Iranian people that it could dislodge Shi'i Islam from their being and civilization.

On the other hand, for the first generation of Critical Theorists, growing up as assimilated Jews within the earliest decades of 20th century Europe, especially Germany, the secularization process had already removed religion as a meaningful social force within the lives of the majority of the people. At best, religion, especially Christianity, was a faint shadow of what it used to be. Western Europe was content to claim itself a "Judeo-Christian" civilization without taking the substantive claims of Christianity seriously. Although a self-declared religious identity remained engrained within certain segments of society, and in some geographical locations more than others, the Enlightenment for the most part had neutralized religion as the true guiding light within the civilization's lifeworld, thus leaving an existential void – the "triumph of nihilism" that Friedrich Nietzsche foresaw.<sup>43</sup> In search of something to replace that which was missing with the demise of religion, Europe in the early 20th century gravitated to the next transcendental cause that could provide the masses with meaning, purpose, and sense of mission. Although not entirely the "new values" Nietzsche had in mind, both international communism and/or palingenetic nationalism, i.e. fascism, consumed the void left by the collapse of traditional Christianity.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, both of these political philosophies were born in response to the false promises of the bourgeoisie, which failed to deliver material prosperity for all. Its foundational principles, *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*, proved to ring hollow for the poor, the wage laborer, the colonized and the marginalized, who remained hopelessly without *liberté*, without *égalité*, and without *fraternité*. Rather, in the name of such lofty values, the Bourgeois Enlightenment brought a stringent class hierarchy, economic exploitation, imperialism and a modern form of tribalism. Although its values remained potent, transformative, and even revolutionary, the bourgeoisie itself failed at its task – to make men free and masters of their fate – thus opening space for a return to neo-pagan tribal alliances (nationalism) or a "new Christianity," i.e.

42 Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Aryamehr, *The White Revolution*. Tehran: The Imperial Pahlavi Library, 1967. Also see Jalal Al-i Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*. Trans. R. Campbell. Ed. Hamid Algar. Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984.

43 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*. Trans. Anthony M. Ludovici. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006), xvii.

44 Ibid., xviii.

Marxism – messianism without the *heavenly* messiah. As such, both Marxism and fascism can be understood as the Bourgeoisie's inner-criticism.

For our two schools of thought, Shariati's and the Frankfurt School's, these contexts determined the relationship of their political philosophies to religion. For Shariati, the still religious context of Iran would not allow him to follow the Frankfurt School in their sublation (*aufheben*) of the emancipatory, prophetic, liberational and revolutionary aspects of religion into non-conformist secular philosophy, which rescued religion's core values while simultaneously allowed its public face to move into the background of history. In essence, religion was *determinately negated* into philosophy, sociology, and secular revolutionary praxis, which was appropriate for a modern secular society, such as Europe. Yet, what the Frankfurt School did, Shariati could not do; he was bound to a very different society. For him, there was no way to abandon Shi'i Islam for secular philosophy, despite his thorough knowledge of the latter. Rather, secular philosophy, especially that of Marxism, neo-Marxism, and other forms of radical third world liberation philosophy, had to be *determinedly negated*, or sublated, into revolutionary religion; it had to shed its secular garb and offer its most revolutionary semantic and semiotic materials to religion, so that religion may once again come into contact with that which was suppressed within itself: the prophetic and *tawhīdic* way-of-being of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>45</sup> In a sense, Shariati created an *Islamic liberation theology*, not a *secular revolutionary philosophy*.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the revolutionary elements of Judaism and Christianity, which had been determinately negated into secular political philosophy in the West, where integrated into Shi'i Islam by Shariati, in effect fertilizing the grounds for the revolution in Iran with oppositional thought. This does not mean that the Iranian revolution relied on what was essentially a secular form of Christianity (if we can see Marxism and other leftist liberational thought in that way), but rather those revolutionary semantics and semiotics born out of secular liberational philosophy *reawakened* materials *already dwelling within Islam*, and in particular Shi'i Islam – the Islam of the martyrs 'Ali and Ḥussein: the spirit of Karbalā.<sup>47</sup>

45 In terms of the history of revolution, Muhammad's liberational revolt against the oppressive and unjust conditions of Arabia's *Jāhiliyyah*, continued the same *geist* that animated both the intellectual/political revolt of Socrates in Athens and the slave revolt of Spartacus in Rome.

46 See Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993/2006), Chapter 2.

47 See Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), Chapter 3.

The articulation of man's aspiration towards freedom, rationality, wholeness, and peace found in both secular revolutionary philosophy and revolutionary Islam remains the common ground and common source of solidarity between these two sometime-complimentary sources of radical change. This can be witnessed within the Iranian revolution itself, as those who attempted to liberate Iran from the oppression of the Shah were mainly those who embraced some form of radical left-wing liberation thought, i.e. anti-imperialism, Marxism, neo-Marxism, Trotskyism, and Critical Theory, etc., or those influenced by Shariati's class-conscious Islam, including Ayatollah Khomeini. Even outside of Iran, those secular intellectuals who had sympathy for national liberation struggles saw something in the Iranian revolution that was genuinely emancipatory, overruling their general suspicion of religion. Although the particularities of the Shi'i tradition remained mysteries to many of them, they nevertheless could recognize the hallmarks of an oppressed people attempting to overthrow an unjust and corrupt puppet regime imposed upon them by a neo-liberal capitalist superpower. For example, the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, enthusiastically embraced the Iranian revolution, despite the many western critics that pointed to the revolution's more brutal aspects and its ties to clerical authority, which Foucault himself could not embrace.<sup>48</sup>

### Critical Theory of Religion and Revolutionary Islam in an Age of Neo-fascism

Both in Islam and the Critical Theory of Religion, or "dialectical religiology," as developed by the Frankfurt School for Social Research, prophetic voices remain vital for the welfare of society. In Islam, the "seal of the prophets" (*khātam al-nabīyīn*), Prophet Muhammad, has come, fulfilled his mission, and in doing so ended the possibility of another prophet sent directly from the divine to engage in theological clarification and social transformation. Nevertheless, the post-Prophet "prophetic" remains important for believers, because it is the prophetic followers of the Prophet who speak the truth of the prophet, even though they do not consider themselves directly commissioned to deliver the divine's message. Similarly, Critical Theory embraces the "prophetic," even though it is skeptical of the idea of an apophatic divinity amidst the imminent

48 Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016; also see Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

godlessness of secular modernity. This is especially true in light of modernity's horrific catastrophes, which have only sharpened the painful contradictions of the theodicy problem. Yet for the critical philosopher of religion, the prophetic represents the unrelenting Socratic spirit – in religious form – that stands in opposition to unaccountable power, identifies the lies, and boldly proclaims the truth concealed behind the necessary appearances of the already existing society. Thus, as *ahl al-nabīyīn* (people of the prophets), the Muslims and the Critical Theorists can both humbly take upon themselves the mantle of the prophets, and *enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong* (*al-Qur'ān* 3:110). Thus, they can cooperate in the struggle for the creation of a society rooted in justice, equality, brotherhood, and reconciliation, as both *responsible intellectuals* and *responsible believers*.

However, just as there were prophets in antiquity, there were false-prophets in antiquity. Likewise, just as there are those who are prophetic in modernity, there are those who are falsely-prophetic in modernity. Modernity, especially in an age of rising tensions between the West and the Muslim world, between the religious right and the secular right (alt-Right and New Right), between global neo-liberalism and political Islam, between fascism and the world, breeds false-prophets. They are the ubiquitous spawn of the *al-Jāhiliyyah al-Jadīd* (new age of ignorance), who traffic in the gods of palingenetic nationalism, Wiedergänger consumerism, invasive capitalism, and neo-fascist tribalism. Their gods are those of money, the market, race, power and greed.<sup>49</sup> However, unlike in a religious age, where the false-prophets could be readily identified, we now live in an age of religious illiteracy, which is so desperate for transcendent guidance that the false-prophets of modernity suffice as legitimate leaders of nations. They sell the illusion of genuine prophetic religion and the emancipatory power of the Enlightenment to their unwitting purchasers, who do not realize they're buying existential, political, and economic "snake-oil." This has been a catastrophe for both the West and the Muslim world, as the masses have been left in the hands of those who only seek their own self-aggrandizement, their own self-interest, and their own self-satisfaction, at the expense of those who have unwittingly invested themselves into the very status quo that has brutalized and debased them for generations.

49 Against the Huntington "Clash of Civilization" thesis, the Argentinian Pope Francis claims that the calamities of the modern world are not religiously-inspired, but are rather the result of the deification of money. See Joanna Berendt, "Pope Francis says World is at War, but it's Not a Religious Conflict." <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/world/europe/pope-francis-poland-world-youth-day.html> (Accessed 2/25/2017).

Since the terror attacks of September 11th, 2001, and the subsequent “war on terror” that has brought terrorist violence to the streets of major western cities, there has been an ever increasing rise of neo-fascism, which threatens to swallow up the progress made by nations following the devastation of World War II. Additionally, in the Muslim world, among the ashes of Islam’s civilizational peak and the ruins of colonialism and imperialism, many Muslims have turned to authoritarian political ideologies camouflaged under a false veneer of Messianic-Islam. From the perspective of the Socratic and prophetic, both ideologies make mockeries out of the real Enlightenment movements they claim to support. *Takfiri*-religious extremism, especially in the Muslim world, betrays the progressivity, revolutionary, and emancipatory basis upon which Prophet Muhammad created his egalitarian community in Medina. The West, having long since abandoned any substantive attachment to Christianity, has throughout the 20th century abandoned much of the Enlightenment as well, transforming it into a tool of domination and legitimation for its continuous economic colonization of the globe: the *dialectic of Enlightenment*. For example, in the name of western modernization, Iran was economically colonized by the United States and their puppet the Shah.<sup>50</sup> In the name of women’s liberation, agrarian reform, and technological advancement, the Shah imposed a repressive worldview and *way-of-being* that was alien to the majority of the population – forcing many to adopt the colonized mind or be marginalized within their own country. While the Shah spoke in the “name of the people,” he stole the people’s future in the name of the ideological promises of the western Enlightenment.

While the Shah extolled the benefits and values of westernization, he not only failed to embody those values, but he also failed to translate the Enlightenment’s ideals into Islamic language, through which deeply religious people could understand. Ali Shariati himself demonstrated that such translation could be done. The Enlightenment’s quest to make man the master of his fate could find articulation within Islam’s *tawhīdic* parlance, as Islam itself was against slavery (bondage) to others and to the desires-of-self (*nafs*). Through his recalcitrant speeches and lectures, Shariati demonstrated that the Shah was not interested in those liberational values, principles, and ideals, expressed in the Enlightenment’s core language. Rather, he was solely interested in the functionalization of such language to legitimize actions taken to benefit himself and those connected to him. In other words, the language of the western enlightenment was ideological camouflage for pure greed and power – which only diminished the veracity of the Enlightenment’s verbiage in the

50 John Perkins, *The New Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*. (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2016), 117–121.

perspective on many. For Shariati, as a devout Muslim as well as someone who was rooted firmly in the revolutionary aspects of the Enlightenment, both in its Bourgeois and Marxian forms, such a distortion of language, as practiced by the Shah, could not stand unopposed. If prophetic and revolutionary language was to mean anything, it had to be in support of man's substantive emancipation, not an ideological project that either preserved the unjust status quo or furthered man's exploitation. Such bold moves by *responsible intellectuals*, as Shariati called them, are desperately needed in a time wherein many in the West are turning towards neo-fascism to solve their existential and economic crises, and many in the Muslim world are embracing an Islam detached from the concept of justice and mercy as a way of "defending" the *dār al-Islam*. If forms of nihilistic destructiveness are to triumph, it is precisely because those who have the ability to act against it, the mind to understand it, and the desire to confront it, fail to translate and mobilize such capacities into political action, in the way the first generation of Critical Theorists and Ali Shariati did.

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