

Ali Rahnama

AN ISLAMIC UTOPIAN
A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati

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Preface

The political biography of Ali Shari'ati, considered by many as the ideological father of the Iranian revolution of 1979, is not only an account of one person's life but of the cultural, social and political conditions that reared him. Ali Shari'ati's life spans the highly sensitive period of change during which a conscious effort was made by the Pahlavi dynasty to push Iran from its presumed traditional status towards a Western-defined state of modernity. A product of the transformation initiated by Reza Shah, during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, Ali Shari'ati became actively involved in, and was greatly influenced by, the multifarious changes that Iranian society underwent in terms of economics, politics, ethics, culture, poetry, prose, film, journalism and even religion. A synthesis of many contradictory currents, Shari'ati became an instrumental figure in the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty. In this respect, his life reflects the convulsions of a culturally rich and historically ancient society confronted with the tides of changing times.

A society in a state of flux witnesses new alignments. Ideas and positions become polarized and those convinced of the absolute truth of their own are at a disadvantage when it comes to synthesis. Those in favour of an ideal modernity at all costs become as inflexible in their assessment of what is and what ought to be as those who cling to a traditional religion as their last defence in the face of pressing necessities. True believers, fixed in their ways, they never question. For Iranians, the genuine need for modernity and the struggle to protect Islam became a contradictory dilemma. Modernity was westward-looking, change-oriented and anti-traditional, while Islam was the formal cornerstone of society's established traditional values, a deeply-valued reliable cultural heritage. For a majority of intellectuals, Islam and modernity presented a trade-off. The choice of a path to modernity – economic, political and ideological – posed itself only after modernity was pursued at the cost of religion. This clash of powerful contradictory ideas left a few intellectuals – a third group who sought a union of opposites – in a limbo of uncertainty. Ali Shari'ati was of this group.

In his youth, and later in his active life, Shari'ati's praxis was the testing ground of his beliefs. Even though his vision of the ideal society was formed relatively

automatic ticket to Iran's university system. Other than the status and acknowledgement that a university post provided him, he needed a public that, if not intellectually and politically aware, at least had the motivation and willingness to acquire these characteristics. It was for this type of public that Shari'ati had prepared himself and with whom he hoped to have a meaningful dialogue. He was not a teacher in the classical sense of the word. The observation of punctual classroom hours and the application of rigid discipline were against his nature. He had neither the self-discipline to write a detailed syllabus, let alone follow or finish it, nor the patience to correct exam papers. What he liked about teaching was the excitement of lecturing and communicating what he believed was eye-opening. As a poetic political orator he could improvise for just about anything he had to teach. In the name of geography, history, literature or sociology he lectured on what he thought was important only if he felt his audience would appreciate it. High school teaching in Mashhad naturally dispirited him.

Shari'ati missed the bustling political environment of Paris with its freedom to think and speak and the fiery debates which it produced. After a passionate period of longing for Iran and its people, he realized that it was not only the political, social and cultural scene in Mashhad that depressed him, but that he felt like a stranger among his own people. He did not share their concern for family, promotion, material rewards and sensual pleasures, while he believed that they did not share his concern for democracy, freedom and independence.¹⁵

Even on political issues, Shari'ati's opinions on what seemed to be obvious matters differed from his radical intellectual friends. On 11 April 1965, the news of an attempt on the shah's life by Reza Shamsabadi, a guard at Marmar Palace, became public. Shamsabadi opened fire on the shah and killed two sergeants before he was gunned down; the shah escaped unscathed. In radical intellectual circles, the incident was widely discussed and the general feeling was one of grief and remorse over its failure. The next day, everyone was debating the event at Hajji Ali Akbar Shari'at-Razavi's (Shari'ati's father-in-law) house. To the surprise of Ali's friends, who had asked his opinion on the incident, Shari'ati argued that the country was most fortunate that the attempt had failed. He argued that the shah's assassination was an accomplishable task; the challenging work was that of preparing the subjective conditions for social change. He said; 'Our society is neither intellectually nor conceptually prepared for what should come after the shah. Rushing events could be disastrous.'¹⁶ Shari'ati's non-adventurist position went against the prevailing political mood among his friends, yet he seemed oblivious to the negative opinions of others about himself.

The gradual realization that his vision of Iran while in Paris was more of a mirage than a reality dejected and pushed him towards isolation and melancholy. His state of restlessness and utter dissatisfaction with his job and his general situation and environment during this period was reflected in his oft-repeated question to himself; 'what are you doing here?'¹⁷ Yet Shari'ati's sense of disillusion provides only a partial explanation of his melancholic mood and his increasing desire for

solitude, the determining factor has to be sought elsewhere. Shari'ati's return from Paris coincided with his preoccupation with gnosticism (*erfan*) and theosophism (*hekmat*), not as a subject of study but as a philosophy of life. His 'conversion' to gnosticism and its subsequent stages of personal transformation marked and shaped not only his future discourse and general comportment, but also provided him with an answer to the purpose of life. His excessive aloofness and unapproachability, correctly observed by his closest friends, were the outward signs of a novice embarking on his spiritual journey.

Salman-e Pak

In Paris, Shari'ati read many of Massignon's works. In two of his books, *The Passion of Hallaj*, *The Mystical Martyr of Islam* and *Salman Pak and the Spiritual Beginnings of Iranian Islam*, Shari'ati retrieved a constellation of symbols, themes and ideas, which served him in developing his ideological discourse. He identified with Massignon's heroes and felt great sympathy for their quest. The mystical bedrock of the activities of both Hallaj and Salman were familiar and dear to him. Involvement with the two men through the works of Massignon allowed him to reconstruct his ideas through their perception. He had become so overwhelmed by Massignon's spirit, ideas and comportment that he toyed with the idea of translating his works from French to Persian. Upon his return to Mashhad Shari'ati immersed himself in translating Massignon's article on Salman. Given his mood and state of mind at the time, this was probably the only kind of intellectual activity that attracted and satisfied him.

Even though Shari'ati maintained that he had translated Massignon's work on Hallaj,¹⁸ he never published it nor is there any evidence that he worked on it in Mashhad. The question, however, remains as to why in 1964, Shari'ati chose to translate and publish Massignon's research on Salman and not Hallaj? If he wished to ascertain and proclaim his faith in gnosticism was not Hallaj a better medium and a more renowned symbol? Was not Hallaj who had been martyred for the libertarian expression of his thoughts and experiences, a more significant religio-political symbol? Was it not Hallaj who personified the hardships of those who sought the Truth and the battle which they were thus obliged to wage against religious, political and economic powers? Was it not Hallaj who had attracted Massignon to Islamic mysticism? Was it not a vision of Hallaj, who had appeared to Massignon as a 'Seyyed in a green turban'¹⁹ delivering him from his agnosticism and reviving his faith in 1908? And finally was it not Hallaj who was the real spiritual link between Massignon and Shari'ati?

Shari'ati's *premier pas* with an article on Hallaj would have been too controversial. Hallaj, known for his sensational statement 'I am the Truth' was the *bête noire* of Sufism, and Sufism itself was always considered as highly suspect and irregular by mainstream Islam. An article on Hallaj's type of gnosticism would have renewed

the old feud between the orthodox believers of the *shari'a* and the heterodox supporters of the *tariqa* or the mystical path. Massignon's article on Hallaj could have further fanned resentment among the Iranian Shi'i establishment because of certain assertions made in it, which could have been construed as pro-Sunni if not anti-Shi'i. Massignon maintained that Hallaj was in favour of a 'moral reform of the Muslim community'.²⁰ In the factional power struggle that constitutes the background to Hallaj's trials and his final crucifixion, Massignon demonstrates how Hallaj was supported by the 'reformist Sunni conspirators' and opposed by 'Shi'i tax collectors' (*femier généraux*) and their 'accomplices, the Jewish financiers in the Court'.²¹

The choice of the article on Salman is, however, significant. First, it seems as if Shari'ati intended to make a statement about his 'conversion' to gnosticism. Second, Shari'ati was committed to the revival of Salman and the introduction of his 'thoughts' and 'life'.²² The partially real and partially mythical personality and life of Salman Farsi, or Salman the Persian, represented the perfect role model of an Iranian Muslim who had risen to the rank of one of the principle companions of the Prophet, if not 'the first of the Three Apostles (*hawariyun*; with Miqdad and Abu Zarr)'.²³ According to Shari'ati, Salman was 'the first Shi'i and the first propagator of Shi'ism in Iran'.²⁴ Third, Salman embodied the unification of three different religions and their final transcendence through gnosticism. He was a Mazdean who had converted to Christianity and having heard of the coming of the Messenger of God, suffered great hardship to join Mohammad and had finally become a Muslim. He was the proof that religions were temporal emanations of a single divine source and seekers of the Truth were obliged to surpass the veils and establish unmediated contact if they were to attain enlightenment. Fourth, Shari'ati intended to repay his spiritual debt to Massignon by introducing and promoting his spiritual guide, who was unknown to the Persian public.²⁵ The fifth, and probably least important reason was that of presenting to Iranian intellectuals what Shari'ati considered to be a scholarly masterpiece. Shari'ati praised the 'absolute objectivity and impartiality', 'precision', 'erudition' and 'research techniques' of Massignon's article on Salman.²⁶ Whereas for Shari'ati, Abu Zarr was the embodiment and symbol of Islamic egalitarianism, Salman represented an Iranianized gnostic Islam.

Salman-e Pak, published in Mashhad was made up of two parts: the translation of Massignon's article on Salman and an introduction to it by Shari'ati. In his introduction, Shari'ati voiced certain opinions which were novel, controversial, and with hindsight revealing in terms of his approach to the construction of social, economic and political themes from the 'language' of Islam. The analysis of the 'language' of Islam, had convinced Shari'ati that beneath the uni-dimensional surface and appearance of Islamic concepts existed a wealth of esoteric allegories and explanations. This new angle was probably a relic of Shari'ati's encounter with Massignon - who, as he himself proclaimed, had taught him the art of 'seeing'.²⁷

The gnostic approach in Islam, Shari'ati argued, was an attempt at penetrating

the outwardly manifest in order to obtain the inwardly hidden. Only through such an exercise was it possible to transcend the concepts and become exposed to new horizons.²⁸ The legitimate sources on the basis of which such an exercise should be conducted were only the Qur'an and the history of Islam.²⁹ Shari'ati was questioning the clergy's traditional method of inquiry and analysis which was essentially based on *hadith* and *ravayat* or Shi'i reports of the sayings or acts of the Prophet and the Shi'i imams. Shari'ati was presenting Massignon's research on Salman as a prototype of how research on Islamic issues should be conducted.³⁰

Shari'ati asserted that the language of all religions, especially Islam, was symbolic. It was not even supposed to be understood by all at a given time. He argued that the allegorical verses in the Qur'an (*mutashabihat*) that had caused so many headaches and disagreements were 'intentionally' inserted and shrouded in a metaphysical language.³¹ These allegories possessed different aspects and dimensions and were therefore naturally subject to a multitude of interpretations. In time, as individuals approached the stage of perfection, they would gradually come to comprehend these verses.³² Shari'ati concluded that it was the Prophet and his Book that had intentionally sown the seeds of divergence and disagreement among the different schools of Islam.³³ Fully aware of the unorthodoxy of his contention, he plunged into an even more unorthodox justification of his finding. As if wanting to prepare his public for his future writings, he argued that unity and similarity of ideas, perceptions and orientations led to inertia and stagnation which in turn could prove fatal for society.³⁴ Shari'ati praised the dialectical tool of analysis which in his opinion scientifically demonstrated that society would perish as soon as contentions and contradictions were absent from the social arena. Having praised a tool, the association of which with the Marxian school of thought was evident to him, Shari'ati immediately referred to two Qur'anic verses arguing that 'God had willed differences of opinion to exist among people'.³⁵ The intellectual and scientific progress of the Islamic world during its first three to four centuries, he argued, was due to the free clash of ideas and beliefs whereas the degeneration and corruption that followed resulted from the hegemony of one 'idea', one 'religion', one political orientation and the faltering of debates and quarrels over competing ideas.³⁶

Presenting the plurality of opinions and the right to dissent as an Islamic principle, Shari'ati argued against the institutionalization of Islam and the consequent centralization of command which 'en chained ideas'.³⁷ By claiming that in Islam the concept of a clerical organization (*rowhaniyat*) of the kind that exists in the Christian church was non-existent, he questioned the *raison d'être* of the clergy. In his introduction to *Salman*, Shari'ati addressed and challenged both the political and religious establishment in Iran. His condemnation of despotism in all forms, his open call for the freedom of expression and an arena for the clash of such ideas and finally his warnings of the impending disaster that threatened despotic and subsequently inert societies was indicative of the fact that Shari'ati was intent on engaging all parties that he held responsible for Iran's problems in an open debate.

Under the spell of the Parisian political environment of free clash of ideas, Shari'ati was intent on using the same tactics in Iran. The introduction to *Salman* was the first volley from Mashhad.

Shari'ati's translation of 'Salman' was based on Massignon's French text and also an Arabic translation of this text by Abdulrahman Badawi.³⁸ Shari'ati recalled that 'in the memory of Massignon and for his love, I stayed up every night until dawn, for a year, translating the article with great enthusiasm, satisfaction, hope and precision.'³⁹ Even though the introduction of 'Salman' was finished by December of 1964, the book was not published until 1966.⁴⁰ Shari'ati financed its publication himself. Then came the period of disillusionment and frustration. Not only was the book for which Shari'ati had great hopes neglected and unwelcomed by the public, but it was also disapproved and ostracised by the religious community. The contents of Massignon's article were branded as 'erroneous' and 'deviationist' and Shari'ati's discourse on the origin of disagreement and dissent in Islam as 'infidelity'.⁴¹ Shari'ati recalled that on the orders of an influential and pious publisher who specialized in Islamic books and who had sought the professional opinion of an Islamic jurist, Shari'ati's book on *Salman* was banned in Tehran as 'religiously and scientifically problematical and dubious'.⁴² It is said that in Shiraz and Tabriz the faithful had been so offended by Shari'ati's ideas that they had purchased the book and destroyed it.⁴³ The intellectuals' reaction to 'Salman' was no more enthusiastic. Amir Parviz Puyan, an old acquaintance of Shari'ati who had been a regular attendant of the Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truths but had later become a Marxist, sent a sarcastic message to Shari'ati saying: 'instead of translating (Marx's) *Capital*, is this (*Salman*) the present you have brought us from Europe?'⁴⁴ Shari'ati is reported to have retorted that, 'from now on I will work on texts which pilgrims use when they visit holy shrines (*ziaratnameh*)'.⁴⁵

Shari'ati's first attempt, after his return to Iran, at initiating some sort of an intellectual dialogue with the Iranian intelligentsia and especially the Islamic modernists among them proved catastrophic. This experience left him bitter, humiliated and even vengeful. He consoled himself by saying, 'to hell with it if the people do not understand and that the intellectuals are even more ignorant'.⁴⁶ For the clerical establishment and its obedient followers who refused to entertain any new ideas Shari'ati bore nothing but resentment. From this experience he learnt that he could not depend on the clergy or the predominantly Westernized intellectuals in order to propagate his new ideas. The public response to *Salman* convinced Shari'ati that the hegemony of one 'idea', one 'religion' and one political orientation could not be easily and rapidly undone by a distant cry from Mashhad. Shari'ati's first intellectual deadlock and the general atmosphere of frustration and disillusionment that had marked every step of his life after his return inclined him more towards introverted self-searching.

After a year in Mashhad, and before the final publication of his book on *Salman*, Shari'ati requested a transfer to the Ministry of Education's Department of Research

and Planning in Tehran. Apparently Shari'ati's friends used their influence to obtain approval for the application. They probably felt that a research position would release him from his unwanted high school teaching and allow him to pursue his intellectual interests in peace. The change from Mashhad's stifling cultural atmosphere to Tehran would also, they believed, lift his spirits. Shari'ati left his family in Mashhad and started his new job in the autumn of 1965. Working regular hours as a functionary did not, however, exactly suit his disposition and taste.

Reza Davari, who occupied the room in front of Shari'ati's office at the Department of Research and Planning remembers that he was always quiet and reserved.⁴⁷ He came to his office, which he shared with someone else, early in the morning and worked until late in the afternoon. He hardly ever left his room or talked to his room-mate, let alone his other colleagues at the Department. He attended regular official meetings, yet never spoke a word. Instead he played with his ball-pen and sometimes drew lines on the pad of paper before him. He left the meetings in the same aloof and introverted manner he entered them, never uttering a word. Those who did not know him thought him as a sombre and dreary character. He stayed at the Department of Research and Planning until March 1966 and referred to this short episode in his life as a 'sad and ludicrous experience'.⁴⁸

A Guide to Khorasan

During his stay at the Ministry of Education Shari'ati was set to work on a tourist guide-book for Khorasan. The book first appeared in 1966, the same year as *Salman*, under the title of *Rahnama-ye Khorasan* (A Guide to Khorasan). It was published by the Iranian Tourist Office. This book is of particular interest since it is Shari'ati's only government-commissioned work. Apart from the chapters devoted to a detailed description of Khorasan's towns, their natural and historical setting, and their historical monuments and relics; the suburbs and summer residents around Mashhad; the city of Mashhad, the private and public services in it and its centres of attraction, the book includes a whole chapter on the history, political and economic geography, religion and culture of Khorasan.

Shari'ati emphasized and traced the historical significance of Khorasan in the history of the Aryan people inhabiting the Iranian plateau. He considered 'greater Khorasan' (Khorasan-e Bozorg) to be the cradle of Iran's political state and the guarantor of Iran's independence in the face of all foreign invasions. Page after page, he explained how Khorasan produced leaders and revolutionary movements that revolted against foreign aggressors, whether Greeks, Muslims or Mongols, ousted them from power and safeguarded Iran's sovereignty and self-determination. Liberation movements, he argued, recurrently originated in Khorasan.⁴⁹ The account of Khorasan's liberation movements and its revolutionary leaders comes to an end with a tribute to Colonel Mohammad Taqi Khan Pesyan the 'young, intellectual and progressive commander of the Khorasan army'.⁵⁰ The mention of

Mystical Murmurs

'We Sufis are all relatives and the pupils of the same doctrine'

If we accept Shari'ati's assertion that in 1964 the sparks of gnosticism, which he had experienced since childhood, finally became a thunderbolt transforming his life and luring him to Sufism, his mysterious writings of the period could be considered as proof of his gnostic quest. By explaining the process of soul-searching and attainment of the 'Truth', Shari'ati describes his quest for perfection: the objective of all Sufis. The allegorical language he uses can, however, be obscure. Shari'ati employed the art of veiling concepts, experiences, events and individuals in a language that possessed an apparent and superficial meaning while enveloping a series of riddles and puzzles. His writings of this type were formulations with two different, if not opposite messages. Shari'ati sought to force those wishing to go beyond the evident and the outwardly manifest meaning of his mystical writings to labour through a mental labyrinth, meticulously unveiling for themselves the truth of his words, just as he had painstakingly set out on his own journey in search of the 'Truth'. Shari'ati's mystical works and accounts of his earlier supernatural experiences were written between 1964 and 1968 and are spread out in his 'Dialogues of Solitude' (*Gofteguha-ye Tanha'i*) and 'Descent in the Desert' (*Hobut dar Kavir*).¹

Distinguishing his mystical writings or '*kaviriyat*' as his favourite, Shari'ati intentionally categorized them as a distinct genre. The term *kaviriyat* or desert-like refers to his book *Kavir* which contains a considerable part of his mystical writings. Shari'ati described *Kavir* as an exceptionally private piece of writing about which he was not willing to talk publicly.² In *Kavir*, which Shari'ati calls his 'story', he boldly destroys all the usual defences which ordinary people construct in order to protect themselves from prying eyes. In both 'Descent in the Desert' and 'Dialogues of Solitude', Shari'ati not only casts aside his psychological shields and inhibitions but stands naked under the floodlights he turns upon himself. These works are unprecedented accounts of self-divulgence and self-negation that are uncommon among socially conscious contemporary Iranian intellectuals.

Kavir, according to Shari'ati, is the mysterious and sad story of 'being'.³ It is an account of Man's separation from God and his descent to earth where he realizes

his forlorn and sad state of 'being' and finally his escape from the prison of his 'being' by reuniting with God. Shari'ati confided in an interviewer that he wrote *Kavir* because he had 'heard the footsteps of a passerby'. The 'passerby', Shari'ati explained, was 'He (*ou*) whom everyone in the lurking-place of their nature longs for throughout life.'⁴ Shari'ati referred to the 'Desert' as a place in which; 'God is present'⁵ and 'one is able to find God easier.'⁶ In Shari'ati's desert, the only plants that grow beautifully are visions and illusions.⁷ He describes the desert as the brink of our worldly existence and the edge of the supernatural world, where one could feel and see the presence of God.⁸ This is why all Prophets received their message in the desert.⁹ 'Kavir is a mysterious nowhere land in which this world and the Hereafter stand face to face.'¹⁰

In the virgin solitude of the desert where no man-made artifacts could blemish the perfection of creation, Shari'ati observed and appreciated the Creator's masterpiece. In his communion with nature, he came to rediscover his senses. With a different set of perceptory organs he came in possession of a new vision, seeing what had been invisible before. He picked up sounds and messages which he previously could not. Shari'ati became so totally absorbed in the purity, grandeur and beauty of God that he fell in love. The desert is the untarnished primal element. In it there are no veils and masks behind which to hide. In it one stands naked and bare; stripped of the worldly ornaments and shields of fame, fortune, status, reputation and lineage. The desert makes a mockery of Man's material achievements. Deprived of the magical security of his civilization, denuded of his contrived technical products Man is left alone with his spirituality. Even the mind is robbed of its relieving power of delusion. Mirage is a gift to the novice, refused to him by the time he becomes a veteran of the desert. In this vast transparent void, feelings and thoughts can not be feigned or faked before the Omniscient. In the desert, the insincere has no place to escape from his shame. It is in the desert that Shari'ati chooses to stand alone before his creator, proclaim his adoration and set out to win the love of his Beloved.

Shari'ati's choice of the desert as an ideal refuge from the banality of everyday life, where one could meditate in solitude, is well rooted in Sufi tradition. Alluding to his Sufism, Shari'ati drew a parallel between Mowlavi, the illustrious Iranian Sufi and himself. *Kavir* was, he said, his *Masnavi* and added that 'like a guiding Qur'an, it leads some and misleads others.'¹¹ The desert can also be construed as a symbol of Shari'ati's state of emptiness resulting from his unknowing before God. Its content could be interpreted as a mystical statement of bewilderment and perplexity (*heirat*) following his quest for a truth unfathomable by rational thought. We can quite safely speculate that what Shari'ati referred to as his *kaviriyat* was nothing other than what classical Sufis called *shathiyat* (plural for *shath*) or the ecstatic words of a Sufi. *Kaviriyat* was a mask behind which Shari'ati concealed his secret words of ecstasy, from not only the uninitiated but also from those who might have threatened his liberties if not his life. Shari'ati recalled how he kept his involvement with gnosticism a secret hidden from the 'religious institution' and

his 'father', so that the hidebound religious public would not know that he had sacrificed his hereditary religion for Sufism.¹²

Ecstatic words are usually uttered by the speaker when he is burning with the desire to meet the Almighty. The concept of ecstatic words (*shath*) could signify 'the pinnacle of mystical experience, where the speaker becomes united to the divine word.'¹³ Words that are expressed describing one's condition and most intimate experiences in a state of exaltation, rapture and ecstasy are also ecstatic words (*shath*).¹⁴ The meaning of ecstatic words is shrouded in mystery and as Corbin emphasizes contains an 'element of ambiguity and double meaning'.¹⁵ The utterance of ecstatic words, however, results from some level of real or imagined communication and conversation with God. In some cases it is even understood as the real or conceived repetition of His words by a human being. The person involved in such mystical experiences usually finds himself in a state of delirium accompanied by a high fever and completely overcome by anxiety. The intense state of excitement which prevails drowns the speaker's reasoning and inhibitions thereby unleashing what seems like incoherent and irrational statements. Words of ecstasy, therefore, appear as flagrant statements of infidelity (*kufir*) while in reality they are meant as affirmations of faith (*iman*). Referring to his own ecstatic words, Shari'ati explained how 'many of his own words and signs were even incomprehensible to himself'.¹⁶ So it is not surprising that he felt ordinary people could not understand him when he spoke such words. He wrote, 'I am saying different kinds of things but no one understands.'¹⁷

Shari'ati's Retreat

After his return to Mashhad in 1964, Shari'ati's inability to communicate with old acquaintances and friends, frustrated and somewhat disgusted him. He felt alone among 'stranger-friends', whose needs and existence he judged as base and contemptible.¹⁸ He described them as hollow and flattering opportunists, whose prime concern in life was summed up in the quadruple of 'stomach, under stomach [sexual organs], clothing and their buttocks'.¹⁹ In a highly caustic tone Shari'ati explained his estrangement and forlornness. He lamented how after years of sharing the same 'path, work, religion, country, neighbourhood, blood and home'; he felt as if he were a complete stranger, 'as distant as one of the billion individuals who will be born in an unknown corner of Australia in future centuries from one of the billion individuals who was to be born before the dawn of history in an unknown South African tribe, but was aborted'.²⁰ The absence of a meaningful intellectual environment pained him. Exhausted and intellectually scandalized by interminable discussion of the preoccupations of everyday life, he yearned for a milieu in which words would be used to outline the contours of grandiose ideals and express the excitement of real or conceived revelations. His abhorrence of the mediocrity of life and the passion with which people around him lived their trivial

and superficial existence gradually gnawed at the bases of all his optimism and faith in mankind.

Shari'ati's aversion to his social environment was one of the reasons for his introversion and his search for a truth beyond trivial worldly appearances. He explained that having searched among different religions he was becoming convinced that he could not have faith in any one of them until he suddenly discovered the way of the Sufis. 'Sufism (*tassavof*), was the only religion, doctrine and faith' which could tame his 'rebellious mind'.²¹ In 1969, he implied that his involvement with Sufism was concurrent with the shattering of his political aspirations.²² He wrote as if Shari'ati the gnostic was born only after the death of Shari'ati the political activist. He spoke of the renaissance of his 'Islam, resignation, faith, gnosticism, theosophy (*hekmat*) and inner knowledge (*ma'refat*)' on the heels of 'the defeat of heroism and the end of the battles and the acts of bravery'.²³

The anguish of 'philosophical agnosticism' as he called it, started to set in. The debate on the reason for existence and the meaning of death preoccupied him during his long spells of solitude. At this time Shari'ati became interested in the thought of Sadeq Hedayat, the famous Iranian writer who had also suffered from the shallowness and pettiness of the people around him and, unable to find anything meaningful in life, had committed suicide. Expressing his empathy for Hedayat's anguish in life and perhaps even his suicide, Shari'ati commiserated with him without naming him. He wrote, 'Woe! How I feel sorry for the lamentable life of my grieved compatriot, who is sleeping a few steps away from me in a forgotten corner of this mournful [cemetery of] Père Lachaise! How he suffered in life from those 'pains that like leprosy eat the soul from the inside and carve out its interiors'.²⁴ As if overcome and possessed not only by Hedayat's pain and grief but also his soul and therefore his style of writing, Shari'ati followed his reference with an utterly atypical passage which paradoxically bears an extremely close resemblance to Hedayat's coarse style. Lashing out at the petty people who suffocated him and Hedayat, Shari'ati described a 'nauseating' paradise and the grotesque sexual fantasies that these 'four legged' individuals hoped they could realize in it.²⁵ In a language typical of Hedayat, yet also recurrent in certain works of Mohammad Baqer Majlesi, Shari'ati described how for these 'four legged' individuals paradise signified a place in which 'each act of fornication would last seven hundred and seventy seven thousand years and seven months and seven days and seven hours and seven minutes and seven seconds'.²⁶ By vulgarizing and insulting what he considered to be the trivial people who outraged him and his 'grieved compatriot', he was taking vengeance not only for himself but also for Hedayat.

Having dispelled his own urge to commit suicide Shari'ati became preoccupied with what had prompted Hedayat to go through with it.²⁷ Citing Hedayat's writings as proof of his contention, Shari'ati argued that Hedayat was in search of a meaningful reason and purpose in life and tried to find it first in nationalism, then in humanism, subsequently in Indian philosophy and finally in Kafkaesque nihilism. When he discovered that none of his solutions could fill the philosophical

vacuum that haunted him he took away his own life.²⁸

Shari'ati argued that it was 'philosophical agnosticism', the 'agony of doubt' and 'the misery of incertitude or unknowing' that had led Hedayat to commit suicide.²⁹ Shari'ati, too, was plagued by all these afflictions. He believed that solitude was the most prominent characteristic of the human condition. In pursuit of perfection, human beings had to become estranged from the collectivity and deeply involved with the 'self'. Reflecting on death, Shari'ati concluded that the fear of 'liberation' from the prison of everyday life caused anxiety and became unbearable, forcing the individual to find refuge in an earthly love or an artistic creation, both of which helped generate temporal bonds and ties.³⁰ Shari'ati sought an alternative to his existential anxiety. 'Directed by gnosticism and the power of love,' the individual could 'glide on the wings of his restless soul' and 'escape to that familiar nowhere land which is not here.' Alternatively, the individual could 'save' himself by accepting the invitation of a prophetic leader with a message from 'there'. Shari'ati concluded that the individual who does not believe in the spiritual message or the calling of his heart and does not find comfort in love or the arts is left with 'what is'. He is then confronted with two possible alternatives: either 'wine' which would help him forget or 'suicide' which would free him for good.³¹ Realizing his own dilemma, Shari'ati heeded, 'one could choose to commit suicide, but one could not decide not to understand.'³²

The Need for God

For Shari'ati, the riddle of Hedayat's suicide was solved. As a disbeliever, Hedayat could only wash down the pains of the meaninglessness of temporal life with vodka and when that proved ineffective, incapable of deciding not to understand, he chose death. From Shari'ati's point of view had Hedayat been a believer things would have been different since he would then have turned to Sufism which would have taken him beyond the temporal 'what is'.³³ Faced with the same questions and maddening uncertainty which had shattered his faith for a time, Shari'ati discovered the confirmation of a premonition he had as a youth in 1958. At that time he had written, 'Oh mighty God whether you exist or not now I need you desperately, all I need is for You to exist!'.³⁴

Arguing that human beings needed to know what existed and occurred beyond what they saw with their eyes, Shari'ati posited that they sought to discover and understand the supernatural. Their awareness of their own solitude was an interminable reminder of the metaphysical. Shari'ati sought to free his soul and spirit, which belonged to the metaphysical world, from the prison of his earthly body and thereby escape the agony of 'what is' while gaining the eternal security and freedom provided by inner knowledge or *ma'rifat*. He thus heeded the call of his heart and found himself traversing the Sufi path. His revived interest in Sufism came at an opportune time. Having destroyed the ancestral God that he had in-

herited and incapable of finding his own God, for a time he became a disbeliever in God and the world of the supernatural.³⁵ Then he found the True God of this world. A God who despised the cowardly, the deceitful, the greedy and the flatterers. An Almighty who admired the chivalrous and those who befriended Him and were intimate with Him. Breaking with his past religion Shari'ati boldly observed that: 'God needed an amorous *aref* [knower] and not a customer of heaven.'³⁶

In his story of creation Shari'ati provides his readers with a clue to the power that moved him to return to God. He explains how Man's bliss and happiness in paradise was really a grinding and painful trial. He argues that a lonely beatitude is a painful joy. Loneliness is only a half existence. 'Being unaccompanied made heaven seem like a desert.'³⁷ Shari'ati explained that God created Eve, a partner for Adam to cure his pain of being alone. But Man's real anguish, according to Shari'ati, began with the simple understanding that the source of his pain was in 'separation' and not 'loneliness'. He affirmed that it was not being 'unaccompanied' that hurt him but the state of not being 'with he/He'.³⁸ In the tradition of all Sufis, He (*ou* or *huwah*, the third person) for Shari'ati was not a human being but God. Shari'ati claimed that having been with Him in heaven, Man's longing for reunion with God began immediately after Man was condemned to descend on earth. The moment man found himself on earth, he became acquainted with fear, anxiety, solitude and longing. Shari'ati wrote; 'But He (*ou*) was not there [on earth], a familiar face was absent, His absence made strangers out of all the present faces, His absence rendered all beings futile.'³⁹ Referring to himself, Shari'ati confided that from the moment he set foot on earth and lost Him, he had nothing to look forward to in the world around him. He had turned inwards and found the 'inner self' to be rich, as much as, the outer was impoverished.⁴⁰ Shari'ati's introspection allowed him to pose the appropriate question. He wrote, 'I search for my essence and cannot find it, I am His shadow, where is He?'⁴¹ Thus began the process of transcendental transformation which Shari'ati called the 'magnificent holy dialectic' or the 'Sufi dialectic'⁴² at the end of which 'Man returned to God' and 'the Beloved (*ma' shuq*) embraced His lover (*asheq*) who had shed his own essence.'⁴³ The reunion, according to Shari'ati, would occur in heaven, from which Man had been evicted. Anticipating his return to the pre-creational stage, Shari'ati wrote, 'I shall return, I will retrieve the heaven that I left behind. There, I, Love and God will conspire to recreate the world anew and recommence creation anew. In this eternal past (*azal*) God will no longer be alone and in this world I will no longer be a stranger.'⁴⁴

Shari'ati's Gnosticism

Shari'ati's gnosticism was an aspect of his battle against traditional religion. Distinguishing between faith and religion, Shari'ati acknowledged that his faith was kneaded into the water and clay from which he was created.⁴⁵ Yet faith, he explained,

had an external (*zaheri*) and an internal (*bateni*) aspect. For him, the essence of faith was gnosticism (*erfan*) and the way to it was through the Path (*tariqa*). Contrasting official religion and its frame of reference, the canon (*shari'a*) with the kernel of faith, Shari'ati believed that concern with external appearances led to 'tradition-worshipping'. The common people, he argued, believed that the purpose of faith was realized through fasting, prayers, the payment of religious dues, the use of a rosary, the wearing of the beard, purification and ablution.⁴⁶ The 'tradition-worshippers' who, believe that outward piety and ritual will lead them to God in reality, substitute the shadow for the real light. Shari'ati wrote, 'I find *eshraq* (illumination) to be superior to *'aql* (reason), the heart to be more honourable than the brain and the interior more grandiose than the exterior. I detest 'reality' (*vag'e'iyat*) [appearances] and believe that the truth (*haqiqat*) is of a far higher order. I am a 'truth worshipper' (*mosol parast*).⁴⁷ Applying the dualism used by Manichaeans, Plato and traditional Sufis, Shari'ati contrasted his own love for the absolute which he labelled as 'truth-worshipping' with the standard practice of 'tradition-worshipping', both aspects of the same Absolute. Demonstrating the inevitable incompatibility, if not contradiction of the internal and external aspects of religion, Shari'ati focused on the struggle between them. He wrote, 'Sufism is the spirit of religion which revolts against the corpus of religion once it realizes that the spirit is perishing and the corpus is uprooting it.'⁴⁸

Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani, one of the luminaries of Iranian Sufism, whose soul Shari'ati believed had sometimes entered his body⁴⁹ and to whom he regularly referred, instructed the wayfarer who sought the revelation of the Truth to abandon 'tradition-worshipping' since it was nothing but idolatry.⁵⁰ Shari'ati's bold proclamation that 'those who become religious through the intermediary of the Prophet are superficial and worthless beings',⁵¹ reflects the elitist indignation of the Sufis with common religious beliefs of the appearance-conscious masses. To the Sufi, the purpose of life was to see the true light. Religion and its rituals could at best be considered a means, yet never the end. Drawing an analogy between different religions and colours, Ayn al-Quzat wrote in a poem, 'this colour is all whim (*havas*) or presumption (*pendashi*). He (*ou*) is colourless, one should have His colour.'⁵² Ayn al-Quzat implied that the Sufi path which was 'colourless' was the authentic path to God. Shari'ati repeated the very same idea in a modern form and concluded, 'one can be a faithful Muslim, a religionless faithful, a Christian faithful, a Jewish faithful or a Buddhist faithful.'⁵³ Having tried all religions, Shari'ati had come to the conclusion that only Sufism, the embodiment of all religions could appease him. This was what he came to call his 'new perception of Islam'.⁵⁴ Emphasizing the fact that seeking God was the subject and religion a mere predicate, he registered his preference for the Sufi's path to God over the mainstream school of obtaining the grace of God through submission to Him and the pursuit of Islamic rules and regulations (*shari'a*).

Rejecting loyalty to religious establishments, Shari'ati declared the search for attaining 'the unity of Being' (*vahdat-e vojud*) as the basis of all true religions

which was primarily a personal and independent task.⁵⁵ Shari'ati declared that, 'this world and the hereafter, natural and supernatural, spirit and body, matter and meaning are all unified and integrated and are each a dimension or aspect of one 'Existing Truth'.⁵⁶ The search for *ou* or He, required a special kind of vision which was beyond the grasp of reason or philosophy. This vision, Shari'ati called *hekmat* or theosophy.⁵⁷ Sufism, was a process of personal soul searching in order to attain the ultimate 'source and [absolute] sincerity [in one's intentions and acts] (*ikhlas*).⁵⁸

Disgusted by institutionalized Sufism, which had developed its own establishment, rites and rituals, Shari'ati argued that in Sufism there are no such things as 'convents (*khaneqah*), sects (*ferqeh*) or poles (*qotb*).⁵⁹ Holding Ibn Arabi responsible for the institutionalization and systematization of Sufism, Shari'ati charged that under his influence, 'whoever got to learn the stages and grades [of the Sufi path] came to be considered as a Sufi, whereas Sufism is unattainable through learning.'⁶⁰ Shari'ati rejected the systematization of an experience which he believed was a gift from God. Theosophy or *hekmat*, the alleged knowledge of God, was obtained by direct mystical insight and could not be learnt through the intellect. Through God's grace, *hekmat* was bestowed upon whomever He willed.⁶¹ The receptive organ of God's illumination was the heart (*del*) which enabled the chosen ones to receive the signals of God. The task of the Sufi was to unveil the heart and prepare it for the reception of divine revelations. Without this conscious effort (*kushesh*) on the part of the individual it was impossible to experience the Truth. In the Sufi tradition, Shari'ati explained, the heart had nothing to do with the biological organ that pumped blood; it was a spiritual organ.⁶²

As emphatically as he praised the function of the heart, Shari'ati derided the role of reason and intellect (*'aql*), which was only capable of 'knowing and not understanding' and of 'deception'.⁶³ He believed that the attainment of a 'new vision' and the discovery of the 'Truth', could not be successfully accomplished through 'studying, books and going to classes'.⁶⁴ He repeatedly questioned the explanatory power and the cognitive ability of science and reason, exclaiming 'woe, that reason does not comprehend such things.'⁶⁵ In the accounts of his own gnostic experiences Shari'ati often refers to a Divine power which regularly drew him into His own domain, thus facilitating his journey along the Path. This involuntary divine attraction (*keshesh*) may be contrasted with the conscious effort (*kushesh*) on the part of an individual to understand the Truth. Shari'ati could be considered as one of those who believed that without 'involuntary divine attraction' (*keshesh*) one could not experience God. At times, in somewhat contradictory statements, Shari'ati affirmed the necessity of a spiritual guide (*pir*) to whose authority one had to submit.⁶⁶ The spiritual guide is supposed to direct the wayfarer through 'the three stages of mystical life, the Law, the Path and the Truth'.⁶⁷ Those whom Shari'ati referred to as his spiritual guides, except in the case of Khazr, were somewhat unconventional figures.

In Shari'ati's scattered gnostic writings we find two seemingly contradictory self-evaluations in relation to theosophy or the knowledge of God obtained through direct mystical insight. At times, he maintained that he did not possess theosophy (*hekmat*).⁶⁸ Affirming that theosophy could only be had by God's desire, Shari'ati lamented that doing as He pleased, God had not willed him (Shari'ati) to possess it. Opining that he was 'predetermined' to become an 'admirer' (*dustar*) of theosophy, he seemed resigned to God's will. Yet elsewhere, in a story, Shari'ati recounts that having objected to the station that God had predetermined for him, God ordered the Guarded Tablet (*lowh-e mahfuz*) to be rewritten in order to alter Shari'ati's fate and destiny according to his own wish.⁶⁹ The *tour de force* in Shari'ati's plot provides him with a privileged and distinguished position in the eyes of God; a position different from all mortals. 'Henceforth,' Shari'ati wrote, 'I learnt the mystery of eternity.'⁷⁰ Therefore, it can be argued that according to his own account, even though Shari'ati was not chosen to be a theosophist, God's will eventually made him one.

Mystical Experiences

In *Kavir*, Shari'ati provides a historical account of gnostic tendencies among his paternal ancestors. He recounts the 'mysterious state of [divine] attraction (*jazbeh*)' of his great grandfather, and narrates how the villagers thought of him as a 'semi-Imam, semi-Prophet, an angel, a saint (friend of God or *awliya* Allah)'.⁷¹ He even lists the thaumaturgic gifts (*keramat*) that were attributed to him. According to Shari'ati, some of the villagers claimed that after his death, they had seen 'a light descend on his grave and return back to the sky.' Eighteen years later the villagers are said to have discovered that his grave was completely empty, suggesting that the light must have taken his body up to the Heavens.⁷² Shari'ati takes great pride in the mysterious gnosticism of his lineage, suggesting that half a century before he was born he must have inhabited his great grandfather's body.⁷³ Yet he points out that although his forefathers spent their entire life searching for Him (*ou*), he was the only one of the family who eventually found Him. Shari'ati wrote, 'This is His shadow; He (*ou*) who suddenly appeared on my path; He in search of Whom my forefathers spent their lives and did not succeed in finding.'⁷⁴

Shari'ati's first chronological account of a mystical experience dates back to his fifth grade.⁷⁵ He maintains that one day on his way to school he heard the ringing of a bell, which pinned him to the ground, sent tremors through his body and caused his head to gyrate. He then had a vision of a green pentagram that shot down from the sky like a thunderbolt and pierced through his eyes and eventually found its way to his heart; then he lost its trace. Shari'ati indicates that for many years he tried to understand the meaning of this happening and finally he wrote: 'is this not the same story as that of the Holy Prophet?'.⁷⁶

In the narration of his vision Shari'ati uses terms, marks, signs and symbols

which are alluded to by other Sufis at the time of their illumination. Both Bayazid-e Bastami and Abu Sa'id Abolkheir are said to have had visions in their childhood.⁷⁷ Therefore, Shari'ati's reference to his young age is not unprecedented. The ringing of the bell is the symbolism used, for example, by Jili to describe his illumination.⁷⁸ The green pentagram is a metaphor for the flash of knowledge and insight that God bestows upon whom He chooses. The light Shari'ati suggests had struck his heart is a reference to the classical experience of 'unveiling' by Sufis, whereby God reaches and purifies the previously shrouded heart of the individual so that he may see the Truth. Abolkheir is thus said to have exclaimed; 'A light appeared in my chest and the veils were lifted.'⁷⁹

Shari'ati's second mystical experience occurred 'during those years between infancy and youth'.⁸⁰ Shari'ati explains how his thirst for first hand experience and unmediated understanding prompted him to accompany and observe a group of men who were excavating a waterway (*qanat*). The group was led by an old man from Yazd who was 'dexterous, kind and masterful' as well as 'a great and mysterious spirit'.⁸¹ It was this old man who taught Shari'ati 'a mysterious lesson' the full scope of which he could not comprehend for many years to come. The man, Shari'ati believes, was 'appointed' to 'awaken' and 'teach' him lessons that could only be taught through 'symbolism' and not 'lecture notes, a blackboard and chalk'.⁸² The lesson was 'the first line of the book of theosophy (*hekmat*)'.⁸³ Rhetorically, Shari'ati asks, 'was it not he who appeared in the guise of Khazr to Moses, in the cast of Shams to Mowlana, in the name of Gabriel to Mohammad, in the mysterious spirit of the Holy Ghost to Mary and in Massignon's silence, glance, smile, memory, words and name to me?'⁸⁴ The term Shari'ati uses for the verb to appear is *tajali*, or divine manifestation. He wrote, 'I believe that he was not just an expert at digging underground waterways (*maqani*), but He (*ou*).'⁸⁵ The old man's act of digging in to the veins of the earth for water found its resonance in the unclogging of Shari'ati's heart. Once the flow of water touched Shari'ati's bare toes, his unveiled heart was also flooded with the bubbling of inner knowledge. This was Shari'ati's initiation ceremony.

The hagiography of Sufis is replete with reports of encounters between them and Khazr during which they are taught lessons, the immediate significance of which is difficult if not impossible to comprehend. Khazr is said to appear only to those chosen by God and an encounter would, therefore, indicate that the person visited is among the *awliya* or the Sufi saints. Shari'ati shows that he considered himself a Sufi saint.

His own writings reveal that from the seventh to the end of the ninth grade, or between 1947 and 1950, Shari'ati was drawn to the study of gnosticism. During this period, he does not recall any particular mystical experience. Yet he explains that after a period of philosophical confusion, which led him to the idea of suicide at the the Estakhr-e Kuhsangi in Mashhad, it was the mystical thoughts and words of Mowlavi's *Masnavi* that saved him from self-destruction. It is apparently after this experience that Shari'ati plunged into the study of the works of Sufi saints.

Explaining his state of mind at the time he wrote: 'I endured the dark night of life in the hope of the sunrise of death, the sun rose, but it was not that of death, to my surprise it was another sun, that of gnosticism (*erfan*)'.⁸⁶ He recalled that at this time he spent most of his time collecting and noting the wisdom of illustrious Sufi's such as Juneid, Hallaj, Qazi Abu Sa'id, Qashiri, Abu Sa'id-e Abolkheir and Bayazid-e Bastami.⁸⁷

Shari'ati recalled an extraordinary experience on 26 April 1958, a few months before his marriage.⁸⁸ Comparing his room to the cave of Hara, where Mohammad had received his first revelation, he recounted that it was 'in such a lonely and secluded cave that he had gone to sleep'.⁸⁹ He dreamt that he was under the quiet, calm, moonless, yet star-studded sky of the desert when suddenly an angel appeared and 'recited the message of revelation down unto the uneducated (*ummi*) heart of a silent and dispirited man who sat under the rainfall of thoughts in the deserted solitude of the Hara mountain, and then quickly vanished into the sky'.⁹⁰ Shari'ati could not properly recall whether he was asleep or awake during his vision, yet upon waking up, he discovered his ability to speak a different language.

This may be construed as Shari'ati's account of how he came to speak his words of ecstasy. Comparing himself to the celebrated Sufi of Hamadan, Baba Taher-e Oryan, Shari'ati recounted that just as Baba Taher had sunk under the water and thence emerged an *arif* (gnostic), he too woke up and suddenly realized that a new type of speech, to which until that day he had been completely alien was 'boiling like a spring from within him'.⁹¹ The 'pure, powerful and passionate inner spring filled him until it overflowed'.⁹²

As symbolic as Shari'ati's story may be, in this account, he draws a parallel between Mohammad's Prophethood and his own experience. Recounting his vision in the fifth grade, Shari'ati had also compared his own experience with that of the Prophet. Was Shari'ati trying to build a case for his own ability and right to express words of ecstasy (*shathiyat*)? Was he justifying his membership among the *awliya*, the Sufi saints, or was he even reaching further?

In these stories, Shari'ati may be subtly alluding to his experience of the three stages of certainty (*yaqin*) or faith in the unseen, which a wayfarer may experience, in the process of enlightenment. He writes, 'after *elm al-yaqin* or the stage of certainty and conviction through knowledge, one is thirsty for feeling, desperately in need of vision and longs for audition'.⁹³ This is the stage of *ayn al-yaqin* or certitude and conviction through the vision or sighting of God before attaining the final stage of *haqq al-yaqin* when one attains the ultimate certainty through absolute unity.

Annihilation and Assimilation in God

According to Sufis, the survival of the self or the human ego (*nafs*) constitutes the greatest impediment to experiencing the divine presence. The self becomes a veil

between the individual and God, preventing the individual from the ultimate objective of union. Satisfying the self, the source of evil, forces the individual's surrender to all worldly temptations and pleasures. To understand, feel and finally witness the Truth, he or she has to annihilate the self. The veil is then lifted, and having fulfilled the requirements for experiencing God, the individual awaits ultimate recompense through audition, sight or union. Sufis have provided different accounts of their psychological and physical feelings, tribulations and sufferings during these final stages. Bewilderment and delirium from a burning love, ambivalence towards the outside world and even appearing mad, uttering meaningless, sometimes outrageous statements are some of the characteristics of such Sufis.

Shari'ati's process of mystical self-annihilation is somehow connected with an identity crisis which led to his introversion and self-assessment. In 1965, he recalled that back in 1958, the year of one of his visions, he was confronted with the question, 'which one am I?'⁹⁴ He recounts that his only 'art, power and asset' in life was his ability to shut himself from the outside world and seek safety and sanctuary in his solitude.⁹⁵ Then suddenly, one day, the security of being alone with himself gave way to the uncertainty of who this 'himself' really was? His identity crisis dispirited and saddened him. He needed to identify his 'selves', to fight them. Paraphrasing Hafez's line he acknowledged that, 'I am my own veil and I should be lifted'.⁹⁶ Just as he had distinguished between the object and its shadows in the realm of religion, he subjected himself to the same analytical procedure. As he looked at his shadows on the wall, he distinguished many personalities that were alone or in combination viewed as the authentic Ali Shari'ati by outsiders.

First, he identified a religious and faithful self, whose orientation was towards Mecca. Second, he recognized a rational and Cartesian self, who did not possess faith. Whereas the religious self was born in Medina, this rational self was born in Athens and alien to Medina.⁹⁷ The third self was that of a young author and orator. It was the personality that was more renowned than the others and had obtained some fame; yet according to Shari'ati it was the self most alien to him.⁹⁸ The fourth self was that of a brave hero. It represented the adventurer, the dare-devil popular revolutionary, bent on avenging the disinherited of this world. This self thrived on breaking asunder the chains of the people and basked in the applause and the praise of the people. This was Shari'ati's political personality.⁹⁹ Finally Shari'ati acknowledged his fifth personality or self, which he maintained was the last to blossom in him. This novel self was the one he had long waited for; it was his real or gnostic self.¹⁰⁰

Shari'ati's account of his inner transformations imparts a sense of rapid unfolding. Having searched for all his selves to 'sacrifice at His altar', suddenly Shari'ati acknowledges that He (*ou*) has 'through His own miracle set foot within him'.¹⁰¹ Then, seemingly powerless before what has overcome him, he asks 'What should I call that which is completely engulfing me? I? God? Absolute Truth? Absolute?'¹⁰² By raising the issue of God's presence within him, Shari'ati raises the highly controversial issue of infusion, indwelling or incarnation (*hulul*). The concept of

incarnation or hulul has been refuted and often labelled as heretical by most Sufi luminaries.¹⁰³ A reading of Shari'ati's work on this topic demonstrates a close resemblance between his experience and Ayn al-Qozat's concept of 'the perfection of union and oneness'. In this most elevated stage of love, according to Ayn al-Qozat, any distinction between the lover and the beloved becomes impossible.¹⁰⁴

Shari'ati's string of mystical experiences alluding to the 'perfection of union and oneness' if not incarnation can be divided into two stages. First, that of being overcome and engulfed by an outside power. 'Someone else,' Shari'ati writes, 'has stepped into me and made me so reckless that I feel I can no longer occupy myself.'¹⁰⁵ Second, that of coexistence between him and the outside force. Shari'ati seems to evoke the constant presence of God at his side, a presence that at times is fused with him rendering distinction between the two impossible. In a long narrative, he recounts this ultimate stage as follows:

He is never here, yet I always see Him. I eat alone and He is always at my side. He always eats with me. He eats from the same plate, drinks from the same glass and uses the same spoon. Sometimes I find the spoon that I have filled [to feed myself] in His mouth and sometimes I find the spoon that He has filled [to feed Himself] in my mouth. Sometimes He drinks from the glass of water or milk that I raise to my lips and sometimes I find myself drinking from the glass of water or milk that He has filled. Sometimes I find Him in the form of my pen, disobeying my orders while between my fingers and writing whatever He pleases and I am His stunned audience, the reader of the confused and melancholic writings of His, mine.¹⁰⁶

Finally Shari'ati pronounces a phrase, variants of which had led to the banishment and execution of many Persian Sufis before him. 'Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani, whom Shari'ati refers to as his brother and Hallaj with whom he constantly identifies, were both executed for, among other things, having identified themselves with God. Bayazid-e Bastami's statement, which Shari'ati used as a description of his own condition, expresses yet another variant of this 'perfection of union and oneness.'¹⁰⁷ Bayazid says: 'I shed my self (*nafs*) as a snake sheds its skin, then I looked at myself, and behold! I was He.'¹⁰⁸ Gradually building to the climax of his experience, Shari'ati states; 'I do not know which is the correct statement. Should I say that I am He (*ou*) or that He is me and I do not know the difference. That which exists and is more alive, clearer, heavier and brighter than I, is that we are [the same] one another (*ma ham-im*)'.¹⁰⁹

As if truly born after the veil of unknowing was lifted, and in the tradition of all great Sufis who refused to accept the veiled years of ignorance and darkness as a part of their lives, Shari'ati employed dates reflecting the time elapsed after his experience of indwelling or 'the perfection of union and oneness'. According to Hujwiri, when Bayazid Bastami was asked about his age, he replied, 'four years'. When he was asked how that could be, he replied, 'I have been veiled from God by this world for seventy years, but I have seen Him during the last four years: the period in which one is veiled does not belong to one's life.'¹¹⁰ In the same vein,

instead of referring to standard years, Shari'ati provided discernable days and months yet he also referred to year two, or the second year after birth.¹¹¹ In one case he even refers to the third year after Prophethood (*be'sat*).¹¹² By referring to year two, Shari'ati intended to inform his initiated readers that it had only been two years since he had seen Him and that the veil was lifted. The years of the 'old calender', to which he alluded, were once again a reference to his own gnostic pre-history.¹¹³

To express his illuminations, revelations and inspirations, Shari'ati drew on the symbols, signs, psychic and physical conditions of the Sufis before him. Like Bayazid, Shari'ati spoke of the experience of his ascent and meeting with God (*me'raj*), comparable to the Prophet's ascension to heaven.¹¹⁴ He described the miraculous firework of erupting colourful stars, setting fire to the darkness and punctuating the age-old lull of the barren desert.¹¹⁵ Shari'ati's imagery in this narrative resembles accounts of the night of Mohammad's Prophethood.¹¹⁶ Feeling exalted and misunderstood at the end of his mystical journey, Shari'ati wrote, 'I am the Hallaj of this town and no one understands my language, my pain, my love, my religion, my life, my insanity, my wailing and my silence.'¹¹⁷

Gnosticism and Politics

Shari'ati's deep involvement with gnosticism after his return to Iran may be attributed to three interrelated factors: his sense of disorientation or even cultural shock after his return to Mashhad; his disappointment with his social environment and the preoccupations and concerns of those close to him, and his weariness of political activism.

Shari'ati's gnostic experience required introversion, sequestration, detachment from people, dislike of worldliness and disinterest towards everything but He. Shari'ati's later writings demonstrate that at some time around 1969 he must have confronted a major ontological dilemma. He still felt a deep sense of social responsibility. Some of his Sufi idols like Bayazid Bastami, however, relentlessly repelled their flock of followers and admirers since they believed that concern for the people distracted them from God.¹¹⁸ Caught between his sense of moral and social obligation and the personal satisfaction of gnostic pursuits, Shari'ati sought to reconcile the two. As if justifying his urge to get back among the people, exercising his moral, social and political leadership, Shari'ati wrote, 'I would have liked to sit in a corner gazing at a patch of sky until God took away my life.' But, Shari'ati added that, like the Prophet, he too was commissioned to mingle with the people and live among them.¹¹⁹

In his analysis of the role of Sufism in the history of Islam, Shari'ati identified two contradictory dimensions.¹²⁰ The first was characterized by anti-worldliness and the pursuit of inner peace. This Sufi current was based on the pietistic devotion of the practitioner's entire life to the search and eventual communion with

the Truth. The life of those who practised this anti-social brand of Sufism was essentially based on introspection, introversion and recluse. Shari'ati's found this brand of Sufism undesirable because of the socio-political apathy it generated. He saw it as effectively collaborationist, a source of alienation, resignation and acquiescence and an elitist school in which the majority were sacrificed for the sake of a chosen few. It was the perpetrator of indifference and quietism towards 'poverty, dictatorship, illiteracy, hunger, disease and corruption' and the 'poisonous sleeping potion' of 'Sufi-Safavid' Shi'ism.¹²¹ In his lectures during 1972 at Ershad, as if trying to settle scores with an important part of his own life, Shari'ati cited both Bayazid-e Bastami and Hallaj as examples of alienated Sufis.¹²² Furthermore in defining his concept of Safavid Shi'ism, the symbol of a reactionary, quietist and collaborationist Islam surviving only in a symbiotic relationship with state tyranny and economic exploitation, Shari'ati identified Sufism along with monarchy and ethnicity as its constituent elements.¹²³

The second type of Sufism, which Shari'ati saw as positive, was characterized by heroism, aggressiveness, and a tendency to challenge the status quo.¹²⁴ He saw this as a libertarian school of thought and practice which taught the individual how to obtain his freedom from the chains of religion, the ruling classes and all other oppressive forces.¹²⁵ Shari'ati argued that historically it had rebelled against repression, despotism and the 'decadence, aberration and hollowness of Islam'.¹²⁶ Sufism, therefore, had the potential to become an 'anti-religious movement' rebelling against a soulless Islam of 'restrictions and obligations'.¹²⁷

Searching for a socially committed, politically combative Sufi discourse combining the positive personal aspects of gnosticism with a social commitment to justice and freedom, Shari'ati looked into historical religio-political movements. Sa'id Nafisi, whose works, especially on Sufism, were read by Shari'ati, believed that Sufism in Iran was cultivated not only among the elite; the same notions and principles were also propagated among the common people under the name of *futuwwat*.¹²⁸ Sufi chivalry, or *futuwwat* referred to the practice of those gnostics whose lives were the incarnation of all that was noble and honourable.¹²⁹ Members of this kind of Sufi order were known for their love of their fellow beings, a sense of compassion that led them to become symbols and legends of hospitality, generosity and bravery. The *fatiyan* or *javanmardan*, as members of these orders are called, were reputed for their selflessness in the face of just and noble causes. Inspired by the Qur'anic verses in which the term *fata* is used, Qusheiri defines *fata* as 'he who breaks the idols'.¹³⁰ Following the true model of Sufi saints, *fatiyan* (plural for *fata*) helped the needy and the distressed, liberated those who were subjected to tyrannical rule, brought food to the hungry and provided the people with spiritual and moral guidance. In these orders, the Sufi was no longer an introverted hermitic wayfarer, but a heroic fighter for just and honourable causes. As truly selfless champions of the people they accepted their trials as would any true lover in search of his Beloved. *Futuwwat* combined the Sufi's 'love of God, love of His creation and love of Love' with a sense of 'fearless struggle against

tyranny'.¹³¹ Imam Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and the role-model for all Shi'ites exemplifies the ideal type of a *fata*. Shari'ati too, acknowledges Ali as the loftiest and most distinguished symbol of *futuwwat*.¹³² He also applies the term to Zeinab, Imam Hossein's sister, whom Shari'ati admired greatly.¹³³ In the many treatise on Sufi chivalry called *futuwwatnameh*, Ali, Salman Farsi, and Abu Muslim Khorasani, all heroes of Shari'ati, appear as members of the order.¹³⁴

In the *Fatiyan* Shari'ati found an order that blended the love of God with social action for justice and equality or the love of one's fellow beings. On a more personal level, he identified with the exemplary behaviour of the members of this order who welcomed pain and accepted self-inflicted discomfort in order to alleviate the misfortunes of others.¹³⁵ Shari'ati adopted the Sarbedaran movement as the archetype of a social struggle rooted in the *futuwwat* tradition.¹³⁶ This twelfth-century religious and socio-political movement originated in Baashtin close to Sabzevar in Khorasan and led to the gradual liberation of Iran from the tyranny of Mongol rule. According to Shari'ati, the 'Sarbedaran' movement was the synthesis of revolutionary Sufism and Shi'ism.¹³⁷ Shi'ism, according to Shari'ati, opposed the tyranny of the caliph and thus as an anti-caliphate movement attracted the masses. Sufism, he believed, appealed to the intellectuals since it opposed the Shari'a as it was used by the Islamic jurists to support the caliphate.¹³⁸ Sheikh Khalifeh, the ideological mentor of the movement who preached resistance against the injustice of both the political and religious rulers of the time, was a Shi'i gnostic. Sheikh Hassan Jory who succeeded him and invited the people to go into hiding and prepare for armed struggle was also a Sufi. Both these men were also said to be anti-feudal egalitarians.¹³⁹ To Shari'ati they had 'sown the seeds of consciousness and revolution on the basis of Shi'ism' and 'subjectively prepared the masses'.¹⁴⁰ Shari'ati acclaimed the Sarbedaran's three pronged struggle against the class system, the Sunni clerical establishment and the powerful feudal lords.¹⁴¹

Even though Shari'ati had enumerated the social problems that Sufism could pose, for him, Sufism and revolutionary struggle were not mutually exclusive. In a way Shari'ati argued that an individual's gnostic experience was an educational process which paved the way for the meaningful dedication of one's life to the cause of the people. By the time the Sufi wayfarer is free of all worldly chains including his love for life and ready to be accepted by Him, he has acquired all the attributes of a true warrior for the cause of God. The stage is thus set for Shari'ati to build the bridge and claim that 'Islam invites the individual who wishes to experience God to annihilate or negate himself in the people or the creatures of God'.¹⁴² Thus Shari'ati replaces the Sufi concept of self-annihilation and subsequent assimilation or living in God with self-annihilation and subsequent assimilation or living in 'the people'. This is certainly a novel interpretation. According to it, Che Guevara becomes an armed and socially responsible reincarnation of Hallaj and 'Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani. They are both selfless martyrs of Love. In his search for revolutionary gnostics, Shari'ati presented Imam Ali and Abu Zarr as outstanding symbols.¹⁴³

In the last years of his life, Shari'ati returned to the development of an idea that was always dear to him. At Ershad, he told his students that gnosticism as a social phenomenon was an opium which led to inertia.¹⁴⁴ After his release from prison in 1975, seeking to increase the religious component of his ideology, he returned to gnosticism as a school of thought which is both Islamic and anti-clerical. He argued that historically the quest for gnosticism, freedom and egalitarianism had constituted the three main pillars of human nature and had therefore generated three momentous social movements.¹⁴⁵ Shari'ati maintained that the successful development of the ideal Islamic individual necessitated an ideology which would liberate God and his love from the monopoly of religion, freedom from the monopoly of capitalism, and egalitarianism from the monopoly of Marxism.¹⁴⁶ Such a doctrine or ideology would allow individuals to reach their loftiest human capacities.¹⁴⁷ Shari'ati argued for the teaching of a gnostic Islam, completely divorced from the teachings of traditional and superstitious Islam.¹⁴⁸ This 'gnostic substance' as he called it, if taught at around the age of fifteen, would act as an antidote to immunize the young against Marxist materialism and Western bourgeois thought which emanated from capitalism.¹⁴⁹

In *Kavir*, Shari'ati presented gnosticism as a libertarian doctrine in contrast to institutionalized religion. Later, in the early 1970s, he rejected it as a social menace. In his last years, he once again resuscitated it as an incontestable ingredient of his Islamic ideology. With hindsight, one could present his mystical writings as an initiation for the potential revolutionary who needed to destroy his own ego, denouncing all worldly attachments before reaching God through liberating His subjects. To the critics of the gloomy and melancholy style of his mystical writings, Shari'ati said, 'But shouldn't he who is responsible for constructing also learn to destroy? This is why the reader of *Kavir*, who might stagnate in *Kavir*, and what a catastrophe that would be, could just as well 'wash and purify' himself in *Kavir* before setting out to seek 'martyrdom'. For Chandel, 'only he could die for the cause of love, for whom life has already died.'¹⁵⁰

Fictive Mind

Shari'ati provides a key to the understanding and unveiling of his fictive characters and situations. He makes a distinction between false and improper realities or belying occurrences on the one hand and truthful unrels on the other. He poses a number of rhetorical questions which provide a point of entry into his world of fiction and fantasy. Is Prometheus' myth real? Did it actually happen the way it is said to have happened? Was he really chained to a rock in the Caucasus after he stole the fire from Olympus and gave it to man? Is the story a lie or a fake since it is unreal? Does the fact that it is a myth in any way diminish its grandiose importance and the significance of its message?

In Shari'ati's view only the mediocre believe that all that is real is truthful and all that is unreal and has not actually happened, a lie. For him, contrary to general opinion, there are many truths that are lies since they never happened, and there are many lies that are real. 'There are so many truths, absolute, proper and becoming truths that have not attained body, weight, colour and presence.'¹ What is essential to Shari'ati is not the actual occurrence of an event or the authentic existence of a character but the necessity of conceiving, developing and depicting a significant occurrence, individual, art form or message. The ideal individual, the exemplary poetic verse, the perfect gnostic love story portraying the depths of metaphysical attraction and divine beauty is what is true in Shari'ati's eyes. It is this fictive truth that he sets out to create whenever he feels the need. Yet his fictive truth is always rooted in reality. One foot in the real and one in fantasy: thus is the child of an intelligent game of association born. Is Shari'ati trying to tell us that this semi-fictive mix is what myths are made of?

In a lecture to students at the Petroleum University in Abadan, Shari'ati discussed an ascending group of intellectuals, stars who stood out from mainstream intellectuals, people who challenged prevailing perceptions, ideologies, interpretations and theories.² Familiarity with them and their works was, he said, necessary to grasp this new trend and he urged his students to take note of their names. His list included Ionesco, Genon, Carrel, Fanon, Sartre, Ozgun, Heidegger, Jaspers, Einstein, Planck, de Castro, Mouloud, Eliot and Yasin. In the middle of it was a man called Professor Chandel.³

At Mashhad University

Shari'ati started work at Mashhad University in the Spring of 1966. At first he was assigned two courses. In the series of seven courses offered by the History Department on, 'The History of Iran after Islam', he started with the period, 'From Islam to the Gaznavids', course number 01080205. His second course was on 'History of Civilization', course number 01080419. Both these three-credit courses were departmental requirements for history majors. Shari'ati's first classes were composed of about forty students with an average age of around twenty-five; most were mature male high school teachers.¹ Shari'ati's classes soon became the centre of attention at the university. The subject, content, language and style of his lectures all made him popular among the students. Both in content and form his teaching presented a real break with the dry methods of the traditional academics. Shari'ati's amiable personal character, always willing to engage in a lengthy and uninhibited discussion, endeared him to the students. Furthermore, he did not shy away from addressing issues which were considered politically controversial. His subtle, yet well discerned, criticisms directed at the government added to his popularity. Word of his veiled attacks got around and ultimately reached SAVAK, which in turn complained about him to the University. Matini recalls that 'Shari'ati's problems with SAVAK was one of the department's headaches. Despite warnings about his political indiscretion by the University administration Shari'ati continued to use his classes for the propagation of his ideas.'²

The appearance of a Western-trained professor, using the language and jargon of Western philosophers and social scientists couched in an Islamic terminology, was a novelty. In his lectures, age-old religious concepts which were usually regarded as obscure, prosaic, stale and narrow-minded were imbued with a new identity and became attractive. Having eventually found the audience with whom he wished to discuss his ideas, he set out to achieve what he had already given considerable thought to. In class he had the opportunity to experiment with his newly-found interpretation of traditional Islam. His lectures provided a synthesis of what he had learnt and reflected on in Paris. They may even be construed as a response to the questions he asked himself there: 'where should we start from?' and 'what should we depend on?' The answers, he believed, would provide the proper means of conducting a successful political struggle in Iran. His modernist

philosophical and socio-political analysis of Islamic concepts and his rendition of key Islamic figures in the light of contemporary values and problems, demonstrated the power and scope of Islam. This, however, was Islam according to Ali Shari'ati.

As time passed Shari'ati's popularity increased. In an environment where students had to be forced into attending classes they would flock to Shari'ati's without an inkling of the course title or the topic he was to speak on. One of his students recalled that many just came to listen to Shari'ati – who would speak for up to three hours, often on a topic completely unrelated to the subject he was officially supposed to address. It was not the particular topic that was interesting but what Shari'ati improvised.³ By the autumn of 1968 one of his courses – the 'History of Philosophy and Art' – attracted over 250 students.⁴ Students, even from the Faculty of Sciences and Medicine, skipped their regular classes to listen to him speak at lecture hall number seven of the Faculty of Literature. Aside from the ideas that he conveyed, Shari'ati's personality and captivating oratory bewitched his audience. He spoke hurriedly in a 'Mashhadi' accent, never using notes or reading from texts. The form of his locution varied from formal to informal, yet it always had a poetical ring. 'During his lectures, you would be so carried away with his performance that you wouldn't even feel the chair you were sitting on,' recalled one student.⁵ When the bell rang, people remained seated as if they had not heard anything. It is said that the students and even the teachers of the next class would, after the bell, trickle in and, as if mesmerized by his speech, would stand there listening to him.

Shari'ati's entire lectures were taped, transcribed, duplicated and distributed by his students. One of them, a high-school teacher in Mashhad, recalled that he spent approximately one and a half months worth of his salary to buy a tape-recorder, just to hear Shari'ati's lectures repeatedly and to prepare for his exams.⁶ Others voluntarily spent a considerable amount of time typing, proof-reading, editing and preparing his work for publication. Students took on the every-day responsibility for the publication of both *Eslamshenasi* and *Kavir*.

Shari'ati gradually became a source of inspiration for a large number of young people who were proud of their Islamic culture yet found it incapable of providing tangible solutions to prevailing socio-economic and political problems. He even appealed to a large number of those middle and upper-middle class students whose behaviour and outlook before coming into contact with Shari'ati was far from Islamic. Even students of a different political persuasion respected him. They would come together, listen to, discuss and criticize his taped lectures, preparing their counter-arguments for Shari'ati's next lecture.⁷ Many apolitical first year students gradually found themselves fascinated by Shari'ati's penetrating discourse and personality.

Unlike most professors, who were aloof and somber both inside and outside the class, Shari'ati never shunned or snubbed his students. His style was to challenge students to reflect and gradually lure them into discussion. One such student

recalls that, one day in class, Shari'ati initially agreed with all his comments then, to his surprise, rejected his entire argument while presenting his own. After class, he calmly explained that, 'I agreed at first so that you would pursue your argument un-intimidated'.⁹ Shari'ati was one of the very few teachers who never left a question unanswered and never interrupted students in the middle of their statement. As a result, he was always surrounded by his students as he walked out of his classes.⁹ Despite his popularity, Shari'ati was oblivious to the attention that was focused on him. He kept his followers at a certain distance and was not interested in building a circle of disciples (*morid*) around himself. In the words of one of his students, his 'passive charisma' and 'incredible innocence' added to his fame.¹⁰ According to another Shari'ati sought, through his social and professional behaviour, to set new standards, relax the strict and stifling environment and shatter prevailing dogmas at the University.¹¹

Shari'ati had his moods as well. Sometimes he was inaccessible and remote. In his introverted moods he did not feel like seeing, let alone talking to anyone. During the academic year of 1968/69, a student recalls that he, along with another classmate went to ask him a question in his office on the third floor of the Faculty of Literature's building. Shari'ati, who was deep in thought, had refused to accept them explaining that he had no time. The incident left a negative impression on the two youngsters who had been very fond of him.¹²

Shari'ati's company was very much sought by his students. He and a handful of other young teachers were invited by their male students to lunch on Fridays, when classes were closed. The students who hosted the lunch or were invited were not necessarily Shari'ati's disciples. What they had in common was their intellectual curiosity and their interest in learning more through informal interaction with their teachers. On such occasions, conversation revolved around general and current topics of interest to the students. It was, therefore, natural that philosophical and political issues regularly cropped up and candid and direct questions which could not be safely raised in class were posed. Reza Qanadan, professor of English literature at Mashhad University, recalls that during one of these Friday lunches, the students discussed the huge crowd at Heathrow airport welcoming the 'Beatles' back from one of their tours.¹³ Shari'ati viewed this type of fascination as a substitute for 'worship', which in his opinion was a 'natural' need. He had argued that since Westerners had lost their relationship with God, these youngsters were merely substituting 'reality' for the 'truth'. Bahman Ajang and his friends, who were Marxists, challenged the idea that worship was a natural need.¹⁴ Debate and discussion over the issue lasted well into the evening. According to Qanadan, even though Shari'ati was never subdued in such debates, his engagement in them allowed the students to measure the strength of their arguments against those of their professors and provided an important lesson in tolerance of different opinions.

Shari'ati was an incorrigible and impenitent rebel whose acts consistently defied the system. It would be difficult to determine whether his behaviour was

calculated or simply the outcome of his nature. Shari'ati was the greatest conceivable nightmare of a smooth-operating well-disciplined hierarchical organization. In the words of Jalal Matini, 'the University had more than a few problems with Shari'ati'.¹⁵ He constantly sought to challenge and undermine what he believed to be the rigid and status-oriented customs and practices that shaped life in the University, including the faculty-student relationships. He avoided, as much as he could, what was conventionally expected of him as a typical professor. He neither did what other professors did, nor expected from his students what other professors expected.

In Shari'ati's classes students felt as if their stifled sense of inquiry, curiosity and initiative was liberated. Even though Shari'ati was a master at ridiculing his detractors, in class he encouraged dialogue, listened to counter arguments and enjoyed lengthy discussions without entering into polemics.¹⁶ Some of his most vocal critics later became actively involved with the Marxist guerilla organization of the Peoples' Fada'i'an and lost their lives in street battles. Shari'ati never used abusive language or lashed out against even the most offensive of his students. His defence mechanism was the ironic smile that covered his face as students verbally attacked him in class, a smile which, for the students, was 'worse than a hundred insults'.¹⁷ Shari'ati's tolerance and patience with opposing ideas, even when they were put aggressively, impressed his students.¹⁸

In his typically eccentric style, Shari'ati was seldom present at the university during his 'statutory' office hours.¹⁹ In an official letter providing a detailed hourly and daily record of his presence at the University during November of 1970, Matini reproached Shari'ati for his excessive absences and threatened him with disciplinary action.²⁰ At the time, it was rumoured among the students that Matini kept a close watch on Shari'ati through Mahwash 'N', a faculty member of the History department who shared his office. Shari'ati may well have been a poor time keeper – he was often late for his classes – but he kept his students long after his classes were scheduled to end and seldom left the University at the end of the official working day.²¹ According to one of his students Shari'ati's effective contact hours in class were twice the officially determined hours.²² Outside his classes, Shari'ati spent long hours debating with his students. When his classes, especially during the short winter days, extended well beyond the scheduled time, Mr Shar'i, the janitor, shyly poked his head into Shari'ati's class and asked in his sweet Mashhadi accent, 'Doctor won't you go now?' Shari'ati would then curtly conclude with a parody or a poem, pick up his heavy overcoat and leave.²³ Another unusual aspect of Shari'ati's behaviour which caused some uneasiness among his colleagues was that, being a chain-smoker, he even smoked his Zar cigarettes in class.

At one point Matini sent Shari'ati a register with the names of all his students in it. He was asked to take attendance regularly and was reminded of the importance of the exercise.²⁴ Shari'ati, however, refused to comply, thus breaking a university rule. Matini recalls that one day Shari'ati had entered his class, thrown his register on the podium and declared that; 'we will not take attendance'.²⁵ At

first sight, Shari'ati's act seems to have been the reaction of a pedagogue who believed that students should not be coerced into attendance; if teachers could make the class attractive enough they would flood in, as was the case with his own lectures. A more subtle and revealing explanation by Qanadan, throws light on the dire political consequences that taking attendance would have implied for student activists at Mashhad University.²⁶ According to Qanadan, the registers were imposed by SAVAK in order to keep an eye on politically active students. If conscientiously used, the register might have provided SAVAK with proof of students' intransigence or 'other' activities at a time when they should have attended class. Qanadan explains that during the 1970s SAVAK often checked class registers to verify whether a particular student had been in class or not at a time when he or she was alleged to have been engaged in political activity. These facts throw a different light on Shari'ati's refusal to take class attendance.

Shari'ati's disrespect for the official course syllabus was another source of dissatisfaction among his peers and the administrators in the History department. A year after Shari'ati started teaching, Zaryab-e Kho'i paid a visit to Mashhad and met with Hossein-ali Moa'yeri, head of the History department. Moa'yeri referred to Shari'ati as 'this man that you employed' and complained that he kept saying; 'I don't teach history but sociology'. Zaryab-e Kho'i also recalls that Matini had the same complaint.²⁷ Shari'ati was reproached for transforming the course entitled 'The History of Iran from Islam to the Gaznavids', into a course on Islamology.²⁸ Even though he was not concerned with particular historical events, his lectures were not totally alien to the course syllabus. Instead of covering every topic in the syllabus, he considered it methodologically sound to provide an overall historical account and to establish a firm understanding of the pillars and foundations of the topic. This is not to say that he did not emphasize what he felt was important for the training of an authentic Islamic intellectual. Shari'ati argued that learning about Iranian history after Islam necessitated an understanding of Islam since it constituted 'the spirit of Iranian history' in its Islamic period.²⁹ Shari'ati believed that students had to understand the ideological clash between Islam on the one hand and Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism and Mazdakism which already existed in Iran, on the other. To understand Islamic thought, he believed that one had to learn about its intellectual representative, the Prophet Mohammad.³⁰ Such a chain of reasoning could often change the subject of a course. The University authorities rebuked him more than once for his 'irregular' teaching practices.³¹ Ironically, in the anti-establishment mood that prevailed in Iranian universities, whoever challenged the administration automatically became an idol of the students. A mere rumour that Shari'ati had been reprimanded by the University for his 'unprofessional' behaviour was enough to increase his popularity.

Shari'ati's absent mindedness added to his problems. Sometimes he was late for his exams and on at least one occasion he completely forgot to show up, leaving his students waiting for him. On one occasion, after a thirty minute delay, a group of students went looking for him on the campus and found him in his car,

deep in thought. Realizing his mistake, the absent minded professor walked into the huge auditorium, borrowed his book *Eslamshenasi* from the waiting students, wrote a couple of questions on the board and said; 'you can consult the book, talk, go and get a cup of tea or smoke if you wish'.³² From the point of view of the administration and some of his colleagues, Shari'ati's behaviour was not only careless, unprofessional and irresponsible, but an affront to the reputation of the university. According to one of Shari'ati's students, Jalal Matini, a disciplined and meticulous head of department was upset when Shari'ati missed one of his exams, but never reproached him publicly.³³

Even Shari'ati's exams were a subject of controversy at Mashhad University. He believed that if students were trusted, they would reciprocate. Consequently, he often gave his exam questions and walked out. Shari'ati also believed in open-book exams. But his exam questions were such that consulting books was, in fact, not at all helpful. Even though his exams were officially for two hours, Shari'ati did not impose any time limits. One of the four questions in one of his exams, probably in 'The History of Civilization', was 'The day I came, now that I am going'.³⁴ Shari'ati's students had different opinions on what he expected on in his exams. One of his students, who had failed his course, 'The History of Islam', recalled that Shari'ati preferred to see a reflection of his own ideas in the students' responses.³⁵ Another maintained that Shari'ati did not believe in exams, while according to another, an answer containing a complete regurgitation of Shari'ati's ideas would have certainly earned a failing grade.³⁶ Some considered him as one of those few teachers who was not concerned with grades while others remember him as a tough grader. According to one of his students, Shari'ati was stingy with the grade 'A' and earning a 'B' from him was quite an honour. The same student recalled that Shari'ati failed a good number of his students, who given the confrontationist mood that prevailed at the time, surprisingly never objected.³⁷ The general feeling among his students, however, was that Shari'ati disapproved of students who failed to apply independent thought and analysis; 'he who disagrees with me on the basis of his own reflection is more worthy than he who agrees with me without having reflected'.³⁸ However, like most professors the thought of correcting exams distressed and pained him.³⁹

Shari'ati sulked and complained about being humiliated by the university authorities. He felt under pressure from his peers whom he thought were jealous of his success⁴⁰ and even thought of leaving Mashhad University. Yet dedicated to his mission of creating a reformed Islamic socio-political consciousness in his students, he stayed on. This is what he understood by education. He could not cut himself from his source of real livelihood, his classes which he called his 'small yet grand world'.⁴¹ With his popularity snowballing beyond Mashhad, he was invited by other universities to deliver lectures. As a roving preacher-cum-teacher he accepted every opportunity.

The Jacobins

Mashhad University, like any other academic institution in the world, had its internal politics. The old guard, accustomed to their ways, tried to maintain their hard-earned status and seniority against the upcoming young teachers who found fault with every thing that existed, sometimes seeking to reinvent the wheel. Some six months after Shari'ati was employed, Cyrus Sahami, a French-educated geographer, began work at the university. Soon a core of young teachers without the rights and privileges of the old full professors was formed.⁴² The first issue that brought them together was their objection to an amendment to article six of the university's by-laws. According to this amendment, the Faculty Council was composed of only the full professors. On the days when the Council met, the main meeting – in which the six senior professors who qualified as its members participated and made the decisions – was scheduled for two in the afternoon. At three in the afternoon the remaining 'second class' professors were invited to hear their decisions.

The junior faculty wrote to Raja'i, their dean at the time, pointing out the inequity of the amendment, objecting to the prevailing system as a 'feudal tradition' and asking for its review. Demanding legal representation, they threatened that until steps were taken to redress the situation, they would not attend Faculty Council meetings in which they had no say. The letter was written by Sahami and signed by Shari'ati, Bayat-Mokhtari, Baradaran-e Rafi'i, Sadr-e Nabavi, Nik-Gohar, Zomorodian and Yaqma'i. In his graceful manner, Raja'i wrote back making no promises and asking them for their indulgence, advising them that the senior professors were their elder brothers and that such an act was unworthy of them. It is said that Raja'i, himself a sympathizer of the National Front, supported Shari'ati and identified with his political stance. The group decided to respond to Raja'i's letter and the task was delegated to Shari'ati. He pointed out that their objection to the law was by no means a personal attack on those who benefited from it. Shari'ati argued that under the new circumstances, where the junior faculty outnumbered the senior faculty, the law had become inappropriate and unjust and had to be changed. He therefore called once more for the annulment of the amendment. Confronted with the intransigence of the senior faculty and the head of the Faculty of Literature, the signatories decided to boycott Council meetings.

The hardened position of the junior faculty after the second letter came to be construed as an anti-establishment political act. Although the signatories were not willing to compromise, Raja'i did not take any disciplinary action against them. In jest, he started to call them 'the Jacobins', a name they appreciated. Among the Jacobins, Shari'ati was very close to Sahami and the two men were also friendly with Bayat-Mokhtari and Nik-Gohar. After the protest, relationships between the junior and senior groups within the Faculty became strained, with only Raja'i's mediating role keeping communications open. In 1969, Raja'i was replaced by Matini, with whom the Jacobins had a rather distant relationship.

When the news of Raja'i's departure became public, the students of his Faculty organized a farewell reception for him. In lecture hall number seven on the third floor of the Faculty's old building, they gathered to pay their respect to a man whom they admired and were fond of. To show their appreciation they had brought him books which covered the table in front of the classroom. Raja'i is said to have quipped; 'Unfortunately I will not live long enough to read all these books.'⁴³ After statements by a few students and several minutes of applause Raja'i, whose voice trembled with emotion, addressed the gathering thanking everyone for their kindness and concern. He ended with a moving poem. By this time, the students' numbers had swollen to the extent that newcomers were forced to stand in the hallway and even down the stairways.

After Raja'i's address, the sound of applause reverberated up from the first floor of the building as Shari'ati, late as usual struggled to get up the stairs to deliver his farewell address.⁴⁴ Shari'ati started his speech by presenting a definition of the word *ta'asob* or tenacity of belief. He argued that the word came from the Arabic term *'asbah* and referred to a group of people to whom an individual considered himself affiliated or dependent on, such as a nation, a religious community, a party, a family or a class. Shari'ati argued that, contrary to the largely negative perceptions of the concept, it in reality reflected a sense of faith in, loyalty to and solidarity with the group with which a person was associated. Shari'ati argued that tenacity of belief was one of the distinguishing virtues of human beings.⁴⁵ In conclusion, he thanked the students who had come to the ceremony for their display of loyalty and solidarity. In his usual manner of redefining things and turning old concepts on their heads, Shari'ati praised them for their *ta'asob* or tenacity of belief. Even though, as everyone expected, Shari'ati did not refer to Raja'i directly, the students came out of that meeting with the impression that by praising them for their show of loyalty and affection to Raja'i, Shari'ati was clearly demonstrating his own deeply-felt devotion to his previous superior.⁴⁶

It was customary for members of the faculty to pay a courtesy visit to a newly appointed Head of the Faculty and congratulate him on his new position. Immediately after Matini's appointment, the Jacobins resisted calling on him. Some of their members argued that their intransigence would further complicate their relationship with the new appointee. It was finally decided that they would all meet with him in his study and not at the office of the Head of the Faculty. Eventually, Shari'ati and the rest of the group met with Matini. They sat in silence while Matini tried to break the heavy atmosphere with pleasantries. Feeling obliged to justify his unusual quietness, Shari'ati said; 'I have a toothache which does not permit me to speak much'. Only partially fulfilling their obligation, the Jacobins left Matini's study without congratulating him – and made fun of Shari'ati's obtuse excuse.⁴⁷

The fact that most of the members of the Jacobin group were popular with the students added to the tension between them and the senior faculty. In a highly controversial incident it was alleged that Dr 'M' had slapped a student in class. Dr 'M', a historian and a senior faculty member, was neither respected nor very popular.

It is not clear whether in fact 'M' had actually struck the student – at least one student in that class recalls that she did not see 'M' actually strike the student. Nevertheless, the Marxist students, disgruntled with 'M', capitalized on the alleged incident and called for his expulsion. To assure the prompt attention of the university officials to their demand, the students went on strike. In the meantime, Shari'ati, Sahami and Sadr-e Nabavi, were chosen as mediators. Even though relations between Shari'ati and 'M' were always tense, Shari'ati was adamantly against even the discussion of 'M's' dismissal. He argued that professors should not become accomplice to the expulsion of their peers, thereby setting an extremely dangerous precedent. Although the strike continued for a while, soon the allegedly offended student and 'M' reconciled and the situation calmed down.

The Medium

Shari'ati's less than orthodox reputation was not only limited to his absent-minded behaviour or his dislike of university rules and regulations. Soon word got out that Shari'ati was a psychic involved with occult practices. After his return from Paris and especially between 1967 and 1968 Shari'ati travelled regularly to Sabzevar and Mazinan, where spiritualism is said to have been a common practice. There, he participated in seances.⁴⁸ In Mashhad too, Shari'ati also participated in seances held at his friends' homes, where psychics from Sabzevar contacted spirits. He even took his colleagues Sahami and Baradaran-e Rafi'i to at least one of these sessions.

One Friday, early in the winter of 1970, the students invited a few of their favourite teachers to lunch at the newly inaugurated dormitory of Mashhad University.⁴⁹ Shari'ati, Sahami, Bayat-Mokhtari and Baradaran-e Rafi'i were among the guests. Everyone arrived on time except Shari'ati who was more than an hour late. Entering the room with puffy eyes and an exhausted look he explained that he had been writing something since the previous night and had not slept at all. In spite of his fatigue, he regained his spirits quickly and soon became the center of attraction. Having eaten their *polo-morg* (rice with chicken), the topic of conversation moved on to the separation of the spirit from the body after death. The students talked about a well-known pious man in Mashhad called Dadsetan who was reputed to be in touch with spirits. Na'imi, one of Shari'ati's students asked his opinion about spiritualism. Excited about the conversation, Shari'ati acknowledged that he knew people in Sabzevar who could summon spirits and that he also had the ability to do so. When asked by his students to perform for them, Shari'ati willingly accepted. The group moved upstairs, where Shari'ati placed a small round table in the middle of five or six of his interested and skeptical students. He placed his hands on the table, closed his eyes and repeated, 'please respond'. After a few seconds the table is said to have trembled and then gradually levitated – by at least ten centimeters – and remained suspended in the air while

Shari'ati was talking to the spirit. When his conversation with the spirit was over the table gradually descended. Reflecting on the episode that he had witnessed, a student wrote: 'What he [Shari'ati] did could have neither been magic nor a miracle. I am incapable of naming or providing a scientific justification for what I saw and what I felt with my hands'.⁵⁰ The next day word about Shari'ati's supernatural powers spread amongst the students. Most of them felt that such acts did not befit a professor.

Some accounts relate that Shari'ati was a gifted medium; but others recall the failure of his attempts at calling on spirits. One of Shari'ati's old friends had heard about his spiritualism and was curious about the phenomenon so he invited him to his house for a demonstration. Again two people, one of whom was Shari'ati, placed their hands on a small table. Shari'ati called on Sheikh Hebatollah, a supposed psychic who had a reputation for being unbalanced, to summon the spirits. To the disappointment of his friends, as much as Shari'ati tried, the spirits did not respond and the table did not budge.⁵¹

In his own writings, Shari'ati acknowledged his belief in spirits and explained how difficult it was to prove it to those who only believed in what they could see, count or weigh.⁵² Shari'ati believed that God had provided him with a support spirit which summoned the spirits that he wanted to communicate with. This indispensable gift, he believed, was given to him because of his 'faith, piety, honesty, trials and midnight prayers'.⁵³ Shari'ati spoke of the 'land of spirits', to which he claimed to have travelled and of which he had intimate knowledge.⁵⁴ In a lengthy account, he explained how he spoke with, spent time with, lived with and even shared experiences with the spirits.⁵⁵

In his *Dialogues of Solitude* Shari'ati wrote about an experience during which a spirit signalled its desire to speak to him by rattling the legs of a table so hard that it nearly broke.⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he referred to a seance during which he had called upon Sa'di's spirit and inquired about his best poem, to which Sa'di is said to have given an answer.⁵⁷ In his gnostic and mystical writings, Shari'ati often referred to the spirit or spirits that incarnated his own body and that of others.⁵⁸

Talk about Shari'ati's ability to call up spirits and levitate objects and his inexplicable if not supernatural attributes could have added to his popularity among his disciples, but it did not. It could have added to his aura of mystery and enigma and been considered as a thaumaturgic gift (*karamat*), usually an attribute of gnostic saints. It backfired, however, particularly among students who found the whole matter superstitious, incredible and dubious. Shari'ati's opponents used his spiritual episodes as further proof of his unscientific, superstitious and reactionary disposition. It is said that an article entitled 'call up bread' written by Mohaddess appeared in the literary review *Hirmand* ridiculing Shari'ati and the rumors about him.⁵⁹ Once word about Shari'ati's involvement with spiritualism reached his father, Mohammad-Taqi immediately ordered his son to put an end to such activities and threatened to condemn him publicly, if he continued.⁶⁰ Nevertheless there were those for whom Shari'ati's power to levitate objects was an 'unbelievable re-

ality' which contradicted 'the logic of all they had learnt' and seemed like an 'honest and transparent wizardry from which its magician did not wish to gain anything.'⁶¹

A Patron of Cultural Activities

At the University of Mashhad, like other Iranian universities, secular students had a complete monopoly over dramatic arts. Traditionally, religion and the arts were irreconcilable. Numerous Shi'i Islamic jurists had ruled against viewing, let alone participating in the performing arts. It was, therefore, rather curious for secular students to find Shari'ati, identified as religious, attending a performance of one of Bertolt Brecht's plays. Impressed by the performance of an actor, who played the role of a Nazi officer, Shari'ati sought the young man at the end of the play, and warmly congratulated him.

All those who had attended Shari'ati's classes had become exposed to Abu Zarr and many were fascinated by this character. Endowing a relatively obscure religious character, with whose name many students, even with a religious background, were unfamiliar, with all the values of a twentieth century revolutionary, Shari'ati created a wave of 'Abu Zarr mania'. Many read their professor's translated book on Abu Zarr and discovered in Shari'ati's free rendering of the original that here was a veritable champion of the oppressed who they could all be proud of. The revolutionary romanticism, steadfastness and rebelliousness of Shari'ati's Abu Zarr made him the closest thing to a native Che Guevara.

Reza Daneshvar, a student of literature at the University of Mashhad was greatly influenced by Shari'ati's translation. During the academic year 1970/71, he started writing a play on the basis of the book. Iraj Saghiri, the young man, whom Shari'ati had congratulated for his role as a Nazi officer became interested in collaborating with Daneshvar. For the two young men, who wanted to demonstrate their opposition to the status quo and somehow assist in promoting the anti-shah struggle, staging a play about a champion of the oppressed was an ideal project. Yet to write a play on a religious character in a milieu controlled by secular intellectuals was to risk their mockery. Daneshvar, however, recalled that he was intent on employing religion for cultural purposes.⁶²

Once the play was written, Daneshvar approached Daryush Arjomand, whom he had known from his high school years in 1965, and suggested that they should work together on the script and prepare it for eventual staging. Daneshvar recalls that he gave the script to Arjomand, who was older and had already some previous experience in directing plays. Arjomand, who was an admirer of Shari'ati passed the script onto him and asked for his opinion and help. Shari'ati was thrilled and threw his moral support behind the project. According to Daneshvar, Shari'ati's enthusiasm and zeal was the real reason why Arjomand became so involved with the play. Soon a makeshift theatrical company made up of University of Mashhad

students was created. The fact that all those concerned with this religio-political play, except Shari'ati, were essentially non-religious individuals at the time added to the aura of their work.

The play had one key role – that of Abu Zarr. The supporting cast had only minor parts. Daneshvar cast Saghiri, who was stout and rather short, as Abu Zar. Shari'ati, who envisaged Abu Zarr as a tall thin person, was not too happy with the choice. He worried that Saghiri's appearance would adversely affect the portrayal of his hero; but faced with Daneshvar's insistence, he reluctantly conceded. For his part, Saghiri went on a rigid diet and exercised daily to lose weight.⁶³ As rehearsals got under way, the players became more involved and anxious about the play's success. Attending as many rehearsals as he could, Shari'ati gave them all the moral support he could. Discussions around the play created a collegial atmosphere.

After some three months of preparation, the play, 'Once again Abu Zarr' opened on a chilly February night in 1971. The aisles and the back of the Razi auditorium of the Faculty of Medicine seating 700 people were packed. Before the play started, Shari'ati came on stage and delivered a short lecture about Abu Zarr's personality which he repeated before each subsequent performance. On the opening night, Shari'ati was just as nervous as Daneshvar, Arjomand and Saghiri. He sat in the front row and chain-smoked, his hands trembling.⁶⁴ Earlier in the day he had told the cast that the show could not be mediocre and had added, 'it will either turn out to be a fiasco or a smashing hit'.⁶⁵ The one-act play lasting ninety minutes finished with an interminable round of applause. It was an immediate success.

Back in the changing room, Shari'ati paid a visit to the cast. The atmosphere was tense and full of mixed emotions; joy, pride, achievement, artistic, political and personal success. Shari'ati sought out Saghiri, who was on the verge of fainting after his intense performance. He put his arms around him, sobbed and said in a trembling voice, 'I swear that if I were to die right now I would have no unfulfilled wishes, for you have realized them for me'.⁶⁶

Word about the play got out and it became an instant subject of discussion in Mashhad. At first only a few nights of performance, primarily for students was envisaged. Faced with the unexpected enthusiastic reception, performances were extended to ten nights, attracting audiences from outside the university. After each performance, people gathered in small groups in front of the Faculty of Medicine's main building and on the sidewalks of the Daneshgah street discussing the play well into the night. Abu Zarr, the symbol of resistance to despotism and social injustice became a favourite topic of discussion amongst the young. Shari'ati who was present during each performance, came half an hour before the play started and stayed behind with the cast and the technicians until everything was put in order and arranged before they left the auditorium.

The play, however, created some commotion among the clergy. Abu Zarr was a man of God and his struggle was in the name of God and Islam. Daneshvar's Abu Zar, however, in harmony with the hero's myth, was not a sheepish character but a religious maverick capable of raging against the Almighty. Certain clerical circles

were shocked at Abu Zarr's comportment in the play and some were uneasy with staging the life of one of the Prophet's closest companions. Two specific parts of the play provoked their condemnation. First, Abu Zarr's statement that, 'nothing belongs to God and everything is the property of his subjects' raised the violent objection of a man who tried to throw himself from the balcony in protest. Second, Abu Zarr's slashing of a rope that hung from the ceiling symbolizing his connection with and faith in God, created an uproar. This momentary rebellious act of rupture was viewed as apostasy. During one of the last performances, it triggered the remonstrance of a few people in the audience who were quickly silenced by the rest.

The play, however, became an important point of reference for all those who were involved with it. It was not only a successful cultural experience, but a meaningful, spontaneous and collective activity carried out with enthusiasm and zeal. It also engendered strong personal and cultural ties between those who had participated in it and Shari'ati. Many who came to feel close to Shari'ati had no strong religious inclinations. They had come to respect the man for his energy, commitment and concern in promoting cultural activities that appealed to the students, fulfilled their curiosity and promoted their sense of creativity. Less than two years later, Shari'ati arranged for the performance of Abu Zarr at Hosseiniyeh Ershad. In Tehran, the play proved to be just as popular.

Cultural activities, in different forms, were an important medium through which politicized students organized, developed and disseminated their ideas. At the initiative of religiously-oriented students, the Faculty of Literature organized a book-club.⁶⁷ This was an informal association with no legal status at the University. The book club, through an agreement with various publishers sold books to its members at a discount and founded a small library of some 3000 volumes. Membership was free and the club accepted donations in cash or books. The book club, located above the cafeteria, soon became a popular hang-out for students. Shari'ati was among those who regularly frequented it. He usually browsed through the books and bought a few. On the day that he discovered his newly published book, *Kavir* in the display case he could barely hide his pleasure and satisfaction. Initially the book club also tried its hand at publishing. It brought out a publication called 'That Day and this Day' (*An Zaman va in Zaman*). The students requested Shari'ati to contribute and he willingly obliged. After the first issue which included poetry, prose and Shari'ati's article on *haj* the publication was banned.

The book club was officially inaugurated on 14 December 1969 in the presence of Faryar, the president of the university and a supporter of the venture. Shari'ati was invited as the keynote speaker. In his speech he addressed three major issues, all of which were of great concern to Iranian students. He emphasized the idea that Iranians did not need to ape Westerners since they possessed rich sources of philosophical and intellectual wealth. Seeking an identity in one's historical heritage, he maintained, did not mean that one would have to become, 'reactionary,

superstitious or racist'.⁶⁸ He underlined the notion that human beings were instrumental in shaping their own social existence, concurring with Sartre and the existentialists that Man was responsible for his position and condition in life.⁶⁹ This was a reminder to his audience that they could and should change what they found unacceptable and intolerable. Finally, arguing that rebelliousness was the only common 'doctrine or religion' of sophisticated youth and modern intellectuals, Shari'ati made a virtue out of rebellion.⁷⁰ Proclaiming that the 20th century was the age of 'protest for the sake of protest', Shari'ati invited his audience to engage in independent thought and to rebel.⁷¹ Shari'ati's speech went down well, ending in a long round of applause. His growing popularity with the student body was rooted in the fact that he was their friend, their psychoanalyst as well as their teacher of righteousness.

The Relief Worker

On 1 September 1968, a massive earthquake struck eastern and southern Khorasan, destroying over 500 villages and killing many thousands of people from Gonabad to Qa'en and Birjand. The Faculty of Literature dispatched a group composed of Sahami, Nik-Gohar and Zomorodian to the area to report on the situation. Shari'ati, who was invited by the students to participate in the relief operation, readily accepted.⁷² He accompanied a group to the disaster areas. The object of the visit was to observe the degree of destruction, assess the needs of the people in the region, estimate the quality and quantity of relief assistance for the victims and finally prepare a report on the damage and what could be done about it. In Shari'ati's own words, the group was equipped with no more than ball-point pens and paper.⁷³ Shari'ati provides a vivid picture of the group's impotence faced with the scale and horror of the disaster. The absence of relief and the agony of the people compelled them to join the villagers in digging the rubble and searching for the dead and wounded with their bare hands.⁷⁴ Shari'ati recounts how they were all put to shame by an old man who, in the midst of the calamity, stopped the search at the risk of not rescuing members of his family and returned their kindness by fetching them a melon so that they could rest for a while.⁷⁵

On their return to Mashhad, Shari'ati and Sahami set out to organize a relief programme. Through their dean, Raja'i, they succeeded in obtaining the official aid of the university. Sahami was to distribute aid from a base at Grimonch in the disaster area and Shari'ati took charge of collecting and sending aid from Mashhad.⁷⁶ Since the autumn semester of 1968 had not yet started, the Faculty of Literature building was used as the relief headquarters. The students committed themselves on a voluntary basis to the project and Shari'ati's presence secured a flow of aid in cash and kind from the bazaar.⁷⁷ In his public speeches, Shari'ati's reconstruction of what he had witnessed at the earthquake sites greatly moved his audience and boosted fund raising for the relief operation.⁷⁸

Other than the relevant government organizations and a group of clergy from Mashhad, who operated in the Ferdows area, this was the only active relief organization in the disaster areas. Relief camps were set up in a number of key villages from which teams of students distributed necessary materials to smaller villages in the vicinity. Food, blankets, clothing, shoes and construction material were either provided by the bazaar, collected from individuals, or purchased by the relief headquarters from public donations. An account in Shari'ati's name was opened and money destined for earthquake victims was deposited in it. Although he avoided all financial and money matters, even in his own household, Shari'ati fully committed himself to running the relief operation. There were rumours that the relief headquarters was spending more money on desperately needed material than they had; but Shari'ati was certain that his own credibility and popularity would attract the necessary funds.

Haqshenas, who had been sent by a group of philanthropic bazaaris to identify the most afflicted villages, recalled that on his arrival, he was informed that two separate relief camps were in operation. One was Shari'ati's, the other was funded and supported by the influential Ayatollah Milani.⁷⁹ Haqshenas and his group were advised to work through Shari'ati's headquarters. Tired and worn out, Shari'ati worked around the clock keeping up the spirit of his collaborators by reciting the work of his favourite contemporary poet, Akhavan Sales.⁸⁰ What came to be known as the Shari'ati-Sahami relief headquarters became a dynamic and helpful force which played a decisive role in providing relief to the disaster areas. Its success was such that the Soviet sponsored radio 'Peik-e Iran', after condemning the corruption and ineptitude of the Iranian government and the Iranian equivalent of the Red Cross in bringing relief to the afflicted areas, praised the efficiency and accomplishments of the faculty and students of Mashhad University.⁸¹

Later, in December of 1968, the construction of a dam on the Hirmand river resulted in the migration of a great number of people from the Zabol area to the periphery of Mashhad. A number of poorly clad and malnourished Zabolis unprepared for the harsh winter conditions in Khorasan froze to death. In 1968/69, temperatures fell even lower than usual, to thirty degrees centigrade below zero. At Mashhad University a relief headquarter under the auspices of Shari'ati was set up to bring assistance to the Zabolis.⁸² Once again the students participated in the collection and distribution of food, clothing and blankets to those in need.

A Diversion: Shari'ati and Jalal-e Ahmad

In the late autumn of 1966 Golamreza Emami accompanied Shari'ati to Al-e Ahmad's house in Tadjrish.⁸³ This was the first meeting between the two men.⁸⁴ They discussed Fanon, and Al-e Ahmad gave Shari'ati a copy of Albert Memmi's book, *Portrait du Colonisé Précédé de Portrait du Colonisateur*. Considering it an

important literary contribution, he asked Shari'ati to translate it. When Shari'ati failed to finish the translation, apparently because it was too difficult, Al-e Ahmad asked Homa Nateq, who successfully completed the work.⁸⁵

A few months after this first meeting, Emami returned to Khoramshahr where he received a letter dated 10 January 1967 from Al-e Ahmad. In it he wrote, 'But I have no news of that excellency (*hazrat*) Dr Shari'ati'.⁸⁶ The letter indicates that Al-e Ahmad clearly expected Shari'ati to pay him a visit soon after their first meeting. It is possible that later that year Shari'ati did in fact visit Al-e Ahmad, since his wife, Simin Daneshvar, recalls numerous visits to their house in Tehran. She also recalls a summer during which she and Jalal visited Mashhad and met Shari'ati on a number of occasions.⁸⁷

After the second earthquake in Khorasan and during the last ten days of January 1969, Al-e Ahmad travelled to Mashhad to study the extent of the disaster caused by the two earthquakes, investigate the degree to which relief had been provided to the afflicted areas and observe the tempo of reconstruction in the areas destroyed by the first earthquake.⁸⁸ During his stay, Al-e Ahmad and Shari'ati met a number of times. Each of these encounters may have had some influence on the development of Shari'ati's ideas and his future discourse. On a Wednesday afternoon at Mohammad-Taqi Shari'ati's home Al-e Ahmad, who was working on his book *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Rowshanfekran* (On the Service and Betrayal of Intellectuals), argued that every historical alliance between traditional intellectuals represented by the clergy and modernist intellectuals had been successful in containing, and at times inflicting losses on, the monarchy. Without the participation of traditional intellectuals or the clergy, Al-e Ahmad argued, the struggle against the monarchy would prove unsuccessful. In a symbolic gesture, Al-e Ahmad extended his hand, as the representative of modernist intellectuals, to Seyyed Ali Khamene'i, who was the only cleric present in the room. On another occasion, Al-e Ahmad reinterpreted the concept of the Twelfth Imam in occultation and said that any Muslim who takes up arms and leads a revolt against injustice and repression could be considered the Imam; the Mahdi.

Was it under the influence of Al-e Ahmad's new interpretation of the Hidden Imam that Shari'ati later developed two of his key theories? First, that of *imamate* as a concept of revolutionary leadership. Second, *entezar* or longing for the Twelfth Imam as a revolutionary posture defying the status quo while preparing for the final annihilation of all unjust systems. Belief in the Twelfth Imam, Shari'ati later argued, was faith in the fact that 'the world revolution and final victory is the continuation and result of a great historical movement for justice and against oppression in the world'.⁸⁹

Under pressure from the security forces, Jalal was frustrated, desperate and depressed when he arrived at Mashhad. Although at the time Shari'ati was himself going through a mystical and meditative phase, a state that was not hidden from Al-e Ahmad's perceptive eyes, Shari'ati seems to have inspired and invigorated him.⁹⁰ Through his encounter it seemed as if Al-e Ahmad had discovered his long

lost twin.⁹¹ Simin Daneshvar refers to the significant impression that he made on Jalal and maintains that 'perhaps it was Shari'ati's influence' that brought him back to religion.⁹² Given that Al-e Ahmad's *Khassi dar Mighat*, which is considered as proof of his return to Islam, was written well before he met Shari'ati, it is difficult to concur with Daneshvar's statement. Nevertheless, Al-e Ahmad was impressed by Shari'ati's modernist Islamic discourse and pleased to learn that the two men were in general agreement on the problem of what Shari'ati called *the assimilé* and Al-e Ahmad the Westoxicated. On his return to Tehran, he added a lengthy footnote to *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Rowshanfekran* referring his readers to Shari'ati's recently published *Eslamshenasi*, from which he quoted. He also mentioned the fact that he had had the honour of meeting and discussing at length with Shari'ati in Mashhad and had been delighted that they were in agreement on the issue of Iranian intellectuals' misconceptions about religion.⁹³ Also in a letter to Mirzazadeh, Al-e Ahmad sent his regards to all those he had frequented in Mashhad. He wrote, 'and my last salutation is to Shari'ati, who was awfully depressed. He is one of those who needs to be constantly looked after by someone. And you must do this'.⁹⁴ In the February entry of his 1969 diary, Al-e Ahmad wrote, 'During this trip, I have come to know three contemporary dignitaries of Mashhad; Azarm [Mirzazadeh], Yousefi [Golamhossein] and Shari'ati'.⁹⁵

On 10 September 1969, some eight months after his visit to Khorasan, Al-e Ahmad, a towering intellectual figure, died. Hearing the news, Shari'ati wrote, 'I completely forgot all the memories, ties, friendship, intimacy and harmony that existed between me and dear Jalal. His face faded away in my memory and instead another loomed. It was my own face! It was as if I had heard the news of my own death'.⁹⁶ Al-e Ahmad's caustic critique of Westoxication or blind conformity to all that came from the West, in addition to his return to Islam as a source of inspiration for struggle against dictatorship and injustice had brought he and Shari'ati close to one another. Simin Daneshvar witnessed their lengthy debates and discussions during which Shari'ati piled a carton of half smoked cigarettes and a box of used matches in the ashtray before him.⁹⁷ She remembered that they spoke on how to bring about socio-political change, tactics for raising the consciousness of the people, predestination and voluntarism, the reason for Man's search for God, *jihad* and martyrdom.

Shari'ati paid his intellectual tribute to Al-e Ahmad by including him in his list of 'pionners of "returning to oneself" in the Third World' along with such dignitaries as Fanon, Senghor, Cesaire, Nyerere and Yasin. Shari'ati wrote, 'Al-e Ahmad was an intellectual who had not discovered himself. It was only during his last few years that he tried returning to oneself and when he did so, his supporters accused him of being a reactionary'.⁹⁸ Praising Al-e Ahmad's account of *haj* in *Khassy dar Mighat* Shari'ati lamented the fact that even though the two had promised to go to the next *haj* together, after Al-e Ahmad's death he was obliged to make the trip alone.⁹⁹

Shari'ati's Audience and Discourse at the University of Mashhad

In the second half of the 1960s, politicised students at Iranian universities were deeply influenced by various shades of Leninism, Maoism and Castroism. After the inertia and political inactivity of the second National Front, Mosaddeqism as a liberating belief had lost its appeal. The Tudeh (communist) Party had also been discredited among the young. Even widely-praised and nationally-esteemed militant and anti-imperialist intellectuals such as Al-e Ahmad had come under attack from the revolutionary left. In a pamphlet entitled *Khashmegin az Imperialism Tarsan az Enqelab* ('Angry at Imperialism and Afraid of Revolution') written after Al-e Ahmad's death, Amir-Parviz Puyan categorized Al-e Ahmad as a petty bourgeois intellectual afraid of the socialist revolution.¹ Politically engaged students and intellectuals, therefore, gradually gravitated towards some type of revolutionary communism. It could be safely said that during these years a significant Islamically oriented political discourse or tendency was almost non-existent in the universities.

The great majority of Iranian students who constituted Shari'ati's audience fell into three categories, those for whom religion was a private and traditional affair, those who were insensitive to it and finally those who had come to oppose it. Even though a general anti-shah sentiment characterized the popular mood of the politicized university students at the time, they constituted a relatively small proportion of all students. A good number of students were too busy catching up with the Western-style mode of life and enjoyed the individual freedoms that the shah's regime had provided them. To this group, whose life-style was incompatible with traditional religious commitments and requirements, religious issues seemed retrograde and old-fashioned. To the hard-working and studious types who saw their university education as a key to a successful career and a passport to a brighter socio-economic situation, religion was at best a private affair. For such people, even if they were interested in political issues, active engagement in politics was either undesirable or too risky. For the relatively small group of politically active leftist students, religion was a metaphysical and idealist conception which was

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philosophically outmoded and politically dangerous since it was believed to deter the masses from revolutionary action. In their eyes, it did not provide a tool for social transformation, but on the contrary was a barrier to change.

By 1970 the issue of armed struggle divided the political activists at Mashhad University. At this time, Shari'ati still believed that the subjective revolutionary conditions did not exist in Iran and was convinced of their determining role in the success of the revolutionary movement. He considered the education of the masses in the Islamic ideology as the key pre-requisite to a liberating revolution. The revolutionary Marxist-Leninists, however, believed in armed struggle, arguing that even if revolutionary conditions were absent, they would only come into being through action. One could learn about and prepare for the revolution by making revolution not by talking about it. The revolutionary Marxists accused Shari'ati and those who believed in talking about revolution before doing it of being 'petty bourgeois intellectuals' or spoilt and rotten intellectuals (*rowshanfekran-e gandeher damagh*).²

It was in such an environment that Shari'ati launched his ideas based on Islam as a change-oriented and revolutionary social force. While large numbers of the politically uninitiated and uncommitted were easily won over by Shari'ati's poetic eloquence, the Marxists were confronted with an ambiguous and enigmatic figure whose real arguments and motives they could not easily assess. He was too popular to ignore and too shrewd to be easily baited. Shari'ati made use of their intellectual tools. He employed some of their categories, expressions and concepts where it suited him. Yet he explained such concepts through a new reading and exegeses of Islam and the Qur'an. In his classes, Shari'ati defined the ideal Islamic society which the Prophet was to build as one which would be free from 'political despotism', 'capitalism and exploitation', 'the degenerated clerical institution of a reactionary religion' and 'the statesmen and nobles of the ruling class'.³

Shari'ati's discourse dealt with and attacked those very same historical phenomena, systems and institutions which the left singled out for discussion and criticism. Yet his explanations, justification and clarification of historical and social developments were couched in Islamic terms and based on Islamic sources. The appearance of an attractive rival voice which ultimately invited the young to religion was disquieting for the left, which viewed anything Islamic as change-resistant, superstitious and reactionary. When transcripts of Shari'ati's lectures during 1966-67 on the 'History of Iran from Islam to the Gaznavids'⁴ (later published as *Eslamshenasi*) were circulated his ideas gradually became available to the intellectual circles in Mashhad.

At this time, copies of Shari'ati's lecture notes even found their way to Tehran. Shams Al-e Ahmad who taught 'History of Religions' at the *Elm va Sana't* (Science and Industry) University recalls that it was through a print-out of 'Eslamshenasi', given to him by one of his students, that he first heard of Ali Shari'ati. In a candid and exceptionally honest tone, not common among renowned intellectuals of any nationality, he recalls that having read *Eslamshenasi* he became extremely jealous

of Shari'ati and comforted himself by the thought that Shari'ati must have been a 'safety valve'. Shari'ati's audacity and courage, he said, humiliated him. Several years later when he met Shari'ati, he recounted these feelings and asked for pardon.⁵

Reaction to what was becoming 'the Shari'ati phenomenon' was neither always favourable nor predictable. From April 1969, Shari'ati came under a series of veiled attacks in the Mashhad weekly *Hirmand*. In a series of intelligently written symbolic and satirical articles interwoven with astute puns, entitled *Maqameh Hantiyeh*, Hassan Mohaddess, poked fun at Shari'ati. To Mashhad's intellectuals it was clear that the subject of Mohaddess' long caustic articles was Ali Shari'ati. In the first, Mohaddess ridiculed the cigarette smoking teacher, from whose mouth circles of smoke departed like missiles. This teacher, Mohaddess wrote, had become the defender of Islam at the Faculty of Literature, while in the tradition of Khayyam he drank wine in secret, licking the stains of Liquor and Cognac from his tie.⁶ In the second article, Mohaddess gave more precise clues about his victim and quipped that he did not have 'Ali's will to challenge corruption single-handedly nor was he Abu Zarr, putting to shame the powerful and the wealthy'.⁷ Throughout the rest of the five articles, Mohaddess accused Ali of idealism, demagoguery, false pretences, pretentiousness and selfishness. Attacking his spiritualism and religious idealism, Mohaddess concluded that those who seek the reason for the destitution of the impoverished in the skies are misguided.⁸

Eslamshenasi

At the University of Mashhad, Shari'ati was involved with preparing his lectures and writing on different subjects. Aside from his mystical pieces, his written work during this period ranged from pamphleteering to in-depth academic research. Shortly after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Shari'ati retaliated fiercely against Daryush Ashuri's article, 'Anti-Zionism and anti-Imperialism in the East', in which Ashuri attacked Iranian intellectuals for their lack of independent thought. Shari'ati's article was not, however, published at the time. In November 1967, he wrote an introduction to a book by the Egyptian writer Mohammad Mandour, which he had translated and commented on as his BA thesis. 'On the critique of literature' ('*Dar naqd-e adab*') was published in the Spring of 1968 and was reviewed by Reza Davari in *Naqd-e Ketab*. However, the work that became the subject of considerable controversy, and marked Shari'ati's real intellectual debut, was *Eslamshenasi*.

On 1 January 1969, Shari'ati's book *Eslamshenasi* (Islamology) was registered and obtained legal permission for sale. In a word to his readers, he explained that the book was essentially composed of his lectures at the Faculty of Literature in the academic year 1345-6 (1966-67). In the absence of assigned texts or articles with the aid of which Shari'ati's students could prepare for his exams, two of his students, Shoja'i and Mossadeq Rashti, taped and then transcribed his words.⁹

The fact that the 640 page book has over 400 foot-notes proves that it could not have simply been the unprocessed result of Shari'ati's lectures. He must have added his, at times, lengthy foot-notes to the transcribed text.

Eslamshenasi is one of the few, if not the only academically well-documented book written by Shari'ati and, as such, it reflected his concern, as a professor, with academic research.¹⁰ Shortly after *Eslamshenasi*, succumbing to the demand of his young and eager audience at different universities throughout Iran, and accepting every invitation – security forces permitting – to propagate his message, Shari'ati was forced to abandon academic research in favour of repackaging some of his ideas. Whilst at Mashhad, he was able to incorporate the research he did for his class lectures into his speeches. By December 1972, he was ridiculing those who prompted him to base his lectures and writings on research and a scientific approach. Defending himself, he compared his position to that of his life-long hero Abu Zarr. He argued that Abu Zarr's only response to Ka'b al-Ahbar's deceptive ruling on the extent of wealth in Islam was to strike him so hard on the head with the tibia of a camel that he started to bleed. Just as Abu Zarr had not engaged Ka'b al-Ahbar in a civilized debate, he too could not apply 'the scientific approach' in the face of the 'people's hunger and the pillage of capitalists'.¹¹ 'How can one be a scientific researcher in the midst of such commotion?' he wrote.¹² Looking at his writings in 1976, seven years after *Eslamshenasi*, one can find the same references and quotes he used in that book.

The first part of *Eslamshenasi*, 'What is Islam?', contained the germ of many of the ideas on which Shari'ati focused and elaborated at length later in his life. Some were concepts that he had already developed in his published and unpublished works. Shari'ati lashed out at Westernized or assimilated intellectuals, whom he accused of being entirely dependent on the intellectual production and criteria of Westerners. He invited all 'authentic intellectuals' to be original thinkers and not to parrot the West.¹³ Having ascertained that Iranian society was essentially religious, he did not wish to affront the nationalist sentiments of his audience and therefore argued that one learnt about 'the true spirit of Iran's history', through an understanding of Islam.¹⁴ Moving on to the clergy Shari'ati chided them, claiming that *Eslamshenasi* was 'the first step, in Persian, towards a scientific and analytical understanding of Islam'.¹⁵ In it he enumerated fourteen essential characteristics of 'original Islam', which he readily disassociated from actually existing Islam.¹⁶ To prove his point Shari'ati referred to one or a combination of the following sources: the Qur'an, the Tradition of the Prophet, that of the Shi'i imams and the accounts of the first four caliphs.

Eslamshenasi served a triple purpose. First, it was the presentation of a modern, egalitarian and democratic Islam as the ideal and original form of Islam. Second, the obstacles to the realization of the ideal Islam were identified. Thirdly it showed why it was incumbent upon Muslims, as true believers in the most fundamental aspect of their religion, namely monotheism (*tawhid*), to challenge and overcome these obstacles.

Shari'ati's first objective in *Eslamshenasi* was to obliterate the traditional charges of conservatism and anti-modernism against Islam by demonstrating that Islam was not only compatible with certain modern concepts and concerns, but that these concepts had for long constituted an integral component of Islam. Shari'ati's attempt at reconciling what he believed to be the estranged Iranian youth with Islam, later led to the estrangement of the religious establishment. Based on the Prophet's Tradition, he sought to prove that in Islam, reason and religion were one and the same. He argued that the Qur'an contained various notions of evolution and therefore, contrary to the view of the clergy, Darwin's concept was defensible from an Islamic perspective.¹⁷

At the political level, he argued that Islam was based on democracy, majority vote and majority rule. Shari'ati argued that the concept of *showra* as in the Qur'an was the equivalent of democratic rule and as such it constituted one of the socio-political bases of an Islamic society. The procedural medium for the attainment of such a democracy was *ijma'* (consensus), which he interpreted as the vote of the majority.¹⁸ Shari'ati sought to prove that Islam even allowed for the freedom of the minority to exercise their rights by referring to those who did not vote for Imam Ali as the fourth caliph and the fact that the Imam did not curtail their freedom once he acceded to power.¹⁹

On the issue of individual rights, Shari'ati argued that during the early years of Islam, freedom of thought and expression had been prevalent. Tenacity of thought (*ta'asob*), he argued, gradually became a characteristic of the Islamic societies of the 5th and 6th century (after the Prophet's Hejira) and was followed by repression and bloodletting.²⁰ In *Eslamshenasi*, Shari'ati took a position in favour of tolerance and against the tenacity of thought (*ta'asob*) which he associated with repression and bloodletting. In an unelaborated statement he attempted to prove that individual liberties were guaranteed in Islam. He quoted from Imam Ali: 'do not be the subject of another since God has freed (liberated) you'.²¹ Later, he redefined *ta'asob* as 'responsibility' and 'commitment' to certain lofty objectives and goals and hailed it as 'one of the most noble qualities of human beings'.²² Once he became involved with constructing an Islamic ideology, Shari'ati saw *ta'asob* as a necessary attribute for those who had adopted an ideology.²³

In accordance with the open-minded spirit of *Eslamshenasi*, Shari'ati tried to prove that even unbelievers have a place in an Islamic society. Naturalists such as Abol-A'la, he argued, lived among Muslims and debated with them.²⁴ Quoting the Qur'anic verse, 'There is no compulsion in religion', Shari'ati asserted that freedom of religion was a feature of Islam.²⁵ Furthermore, in a lengthy footnote referring to the free activities of non-Muslim and even anti-Islamic scientists, writers and poets, he sought to prove the existence and widespread practice of religious tolerance in Islamic societies.²⁶

Shari'ati argued that 'universal equality' was a 'natural and fundamental principle', governing all social and private aspects of Islamic life.²⁷ The Qur'anic concept of Man's common lineage indicated that all were created equal and none could

impose his will on another. The Islamic economy as an aspect of the Islamic system was subsequently based on equality of income, consumption and the use of public wealth.²⁸ On the controversial issue of the equality of men and women, he limited himself to saying 'they are of the same origin and kind'.²⁹ Later in the book, Shari'ati admitted that Islam did not believe in the equality (*mosavat*) of men and women, but wished to place each in their 'natural position'.³⁰

Shari'ati argued that according to the philosophy of Islam, Man was both free and constrained. He was capable of voluntarism and subjected to determinism.³¹ The deterministic framework is the general law governing the process of social and historical development, which in a Hegelian fashion, tends towards the progressive unfolding of the Absolute or ideal.³² Later, he called it 'the progression of history towards the awakening of God in Man'.³³ For Shari'ati, the dialectical transformation process held the key to social and historical development. He readily admitted that the dialectical method of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis explained the general tempo of historical development.³⁴ In this sense, he employed the Marxian scheme of historical stages. Yet instead of remaining within the Marxian framework, designating a particular class as the revolutionary force which would initiate social transformation, he named the people (*mas*) as the real force behind historical development.³⁵

The second objective of *Eslamshenasi* was to identify and expose those who contradicted the rule of God and obstructed the people's right to attain perfection. Here Shari'ati identified his targets of attack. He lashed out at all those who had monopolized economic, political and religious power, which Shari'ati claimed to be the common property of all mankind, bestowed upon them by God. He claimed that polytheism did not only refer to the formal rejection of God, but included cases in which individuals performed acts which were the monopoly of God, thus substituting themselves for Him. The cult of personality, character worship or any human relationship in which an individual was blindly subservient to another was idolatry in Shari'ati's eyes. He wrote, 'Anyone who imposes his will on the people and rules according to his own whim, has made a claim to being God and whoever accepts such a claim is a polytheist, since absolutist rule, will, power, dominance and ownership is only in God's monopoly'.³⁶ Even though Shari'ati did not attack the monarchy directly, his subtle and sometimes explicit references to absolutist rule were clear and direct. On the issue of the clergy, Shari'ati was much more direct. He said: 'If we praise a religious jurist and have genuine respect for him to the extent of accepting everything he says, and every judgement he makes and every order he gives and follow every one of his ideas, we would become a polytheist and I would call this follower a "religious idolater"'.³⁷ Shari'ati also argued that Islam did not allow for a centralized and institutionalized clerical organization mediating between God and Man since God's relation with Man was a direct one. He therefore maintained that institutionalized religion would ultimately lead to reaction and dogmatism, perpetrating 'religious and clerical despotism'.³⁸

Shari'ati's third objective in *Eslamshenasi* was to prove why true Muslims should oppose polytheism as he had defined it. Having established the people as catalysts of change, Shari'ati, set out to shed the people's fear of challenging the unjust authorities. On the surface, Shari'ati made a rather naïve generalization by singling out the evil trinity of ignorance, fear and greed as the source of all deviations, sins, crimes, vileness, baseness, vice, and even underdevelopment.³⁹ The *movahhed* or the monotheistic individual, Shari'ati argued, was immune to the evil trinity. His behaviour was not governed by expediency, but by the awareness of the fact that only God was to be feared and respected unconditionally and all others were impotent before Him. Shari'ati endowed the *movahhed* with those characteristics that would make an ideal Islamic revolutionary. The *movahhed* was an 'independent, fearless, selfless, dependable and wantless' individual, who bowed to no other authority than God.⁴⁰ Later *movahhed*, the preacher, gave way to the revolutionary *mojahed*.

Shari'ati's seemingly naïve generalization, becomes a galvanizing political invitation to reject, resist and combat all sources of polytheistic power such as dictatorship, the capitalist system and the official clergy. Shari'ati also believed that Muslims were the only social agents who could rise to this historic and revolutionary occasion, since as monotheists, they could not tolerate polytheism. The polytheistic world outlook was based on contradictions. Later, using the same ideas, Shari'ati developed a world outlook based on monotheism. The 'monotheistic world outlook' (*jahanbini-ye towhidi*) became a powerful tool for action. Receiving inspiration and power only from God, the believer set out to eradicate all sources of false power. Shari'ati's 'monotheistic world outlook' was an open invitation to 'rebellion' against all false gods.⁴¹ As Shari'ati became more ideological, his tolerance began to wane.

In *Eslamshenasi*, Shari'ati presented an Islamic Weltanschauung in embryo. A world outlook, which seemed compatible with the needs of a twentieth century third world country seeking a humane and egalitarian path to development but inconsistent and contradictory since it blended religious idealism based on faith in God and revelation with materialism based on reason and scientific inquiry. Shari'ati's eclecticism, a heritage of the God-Worshipping Socialists, his style and his presentation of Islam in a contemporary light enchanted young non-partisan Muslims who had long awaited fresh ideas which they could proudly defend. These very same qualities, along with the reinterpretations and exegeses that seemed necessary to present a contemporaneous Islam, enraged both the official custodians of materialism and the religious establishment in Iran. To the Marxists, Shari'ati was Islamizing and distorting their ideas. To the religious establishment Shari'ati was liberalizing, democratizing and socializing their Islam, while intentionally disregarding the cleavage between Shi'ite and Sunni Islam.

Shortly after the publication of *Eslamshenasi*, on 8 May 1969, its first review appeared in *Hirmand*.⁴² In 'A word about *Eslamshenasi*', Hossein Razmju extolled the book. He explained why it had attracted the attention of scholars and why it

enabled him to recognize Islam anew. Razmju, a classmate of Shari'ati's at Mashhad University, praised the splendour of Shari'ati's style and said that the book had moved and touched him. He wrote, 'In my opinion (an opinion shared by impartial authorities) not many books of equal strength, breadth of vision and excellence have ever been written on Islamology, the tradition of the Prophet and history of Islam. This is an epic of great splendour and humanity.'⁴³ Razmju's verdict was shared by many who viewed *Eslamshenasi* as a manifesto for the enlightened contemporary Muslim. It was the long-awaited voice in a milieu which longed to retain its Islamic identity without the associated stigma of anachronism and staleness.

After the publication of *Eslamshenasi*, in March of 1969, Shari'ati wrote an introduction to a book on Hujr ibn-'Addi. Akbari-e Marznak, a student of Shari'ati's at the University of Mashhad recalls that on a snow-covered winter day when classes had been cancelled because of the heavy snow, he met Shari'ati on campus.⁴⁴ Interested in the life of Hujr ibn-'Addi, Marznak asked Shari'ati for references on Hujr's life. After learning that Marznak knew some Arabic, Shari'ati gave him a few references and from then on constantly enquired about Marznak's research on Hujr. Once Marznak's work on Hujr, which was primarily based on translations, was finished, he gave the text to Shari'ati and asked him to write an introduction to it. Shari'ati wrote a long introduction and gave the book to a publisher.

In his introduction, Shari'ati severely criticized the clergy on a number of issues. First, he held them responsible for the absence of educational texts on the life of Islamic luminaries. If the heroes of Islam, such as Ali and Hossein, were not really known by the people it was because the clergy believed that 'the love of Ali' and 'shedding tears for Hossein' was enough for them.⁴⁵ Second, Shari'ati argued that instead of shedding light on the ideas of such characters and treating the principles for which they struggled throughout history, the clergy dedicated their time to writings on trivial rituals or compiling the reports of imams. In his first scathing attack on the main pillars of traditional Shi'i scholarship, Shari'ati argued that what were considered as classical Shi'i references were of no use to the educated layperson and that such books should be 'kept out of their reach'.⁴⁶ Books such as Majlesi's magnum opus, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Shari'ati believed, 'caused great disasters' even in the hands of preachers.⁴⁷ Third, Shari'ati criticized the clergy for their inability to introduce lesser known Islamic figures who could become perfect role models for the young. Personalities like Abu Zarr, Salman, Ammar and Hujr were the true followers of Mohammad's struggle against idolatry, the nobility, despotism, ignorance and capitalism. According to Shari'ati, the struggle for justice, equality and people's rule, which was launched by Islam and constituted the objective of these men, was a cause which would continue to exist until the implementation of such ideals.

Politicizing Islam and lashing at those who had depoliticized it, Shari'ati reminded his readers that Hossein left his holy pilgrimage of *haj* unfinished to wage a holy war against those who had trampled upon true Islamic principles. Shari'ati

wrote, 'observing religious rites and rituals is useless when such rituals come to lose their meaning and spirit. Turning around the Ka'ba is of no use to an en-chained people.'⁴⁸ Instead of awakening the people and helping them free themselves from 'repression, lies, humility and bondage', Shari'ati wrote, the clergy have contributed 'nothing other than repetitive and identical *resaleh amalieh* [explanatory texts on religious rituals and practices] on the rites and rituals of *nejasat* (uncleanliness), *taharat* (purity and cleanliness), *zebh-e shar'i* (beheading animals according to proper religious rites) and *shakiyat* (domains of doubt in religious propriety).'⁴⁹ As an intellectual, Shari'ati considered his own role as that of introducing the lives and ideas of the heroes of Islam and thereby familiarizing the people with their own history, from which they could learn and in which they could take pride. Shari'ati's introduction to *Hujr* was, nevertheless, an open challenge to the authority and position of the traditional clergy. The expected clerical backlash came on the heels of Shari'ati's remarks.

The Intellectual Left and Shari'ati

It did not take long for the left to respond to Shari'ati's *Eslamshenasi*. In the Spring of 1968, while *Eslamshenasi* was still in lecture-note form, Ali Akbar Akbari published an article in the monthly edition of *Hirmand*. The article must have come as a surprise since the journal's editor, Ne'mat Mirzazadeh, and Akbari were both close friends of Shari'ati's. Akbari had been a member of the God-Worshipping Socialists in his youth, later joined the Iranian Peoples Party and became a Marxist in 1961. He was an anti-Tudeh Marxist who never joined any particular Marxist party or group. The *Hirmand* article was followed up by a review article in the left literary magazine *Fasliha-ye Sabz*,⁵⁰ and in 1969 by a book, with the somewhat ambiguous title of *An Analysis of Certain Social Problems (Barrasi-ye Chand Mas'aleh-e Ejtemai)*.⁵¹ Evoking standard Marxist-Leninist arguments on the origin of classes, class struggle, historical materialism, the superiority of higher stages to lower stages of social development, the development of imperialism, the deterministic role of productive forces in explaining socio-historical events and an attack on social-Darwinism, Akbari sought to expose Shari'ati's methodological and theoretical shortcomings. To demonstrate the 'scientific' validity of his Marxist position, Akbari supported his arguments with references to Amir-Hossein Aryanpur's book *Zamineh-e Jame'ehshenasi*.⁵² In class, Shari'ati's Marxist and revolutionary detractors based their arguments primarily on Akbari's critique. However, as firm believers in armed struggle and the vanguard theory of revolution they opposed Akbari's non-revolutionary and legal Marxism.⁵³

In his introduction, Akbari explains that he not only wishes to criticize Shari'ati's work but also to present an alternative view on social and philosophical topics. Akbari's book, however, is essentially a Marxist attempt at demonstrating that despite Shari'ati's radical assertions, his beliefs and theories are nothing but a re-

vamped version of old 'idealist' and 'reactionary' thoughts based on a 'metaphysical' method of analysis.⁵⁶ Akbari wishes to caution Shari'ati's disciples that their intellectual mentor is only a pretender whose path would neither lead to development nor to liberation. In a polemical tone Akbari maintains that:

Through the use of reactionary ideas, falsification of history, distortion of science, the falsification of the theories and ideas of others, Mr Shari'ati misleads his students and readers from a correct understanding and a scientific grasp of society, thereby increasingly assisting the forces of reaction and underdevelopment.⁵⁷

Akbari takes issue with Shari'ati on a number of points. First, he disagrees with Shari'ati's definition of class. According to Shari'ati social classes are either based on economic and material conditions of social life or on religious and popular beliefs.⁵⁸ Shari'ati makes a clear distinction between 'economic classes' and 'belief classes', acknowledging in a footnote (that the concept of 'belief classes' is his original contribution.⁵⁷ He maintains that while in ancient societies classes were formed on the basis of beliefs, in recent epochs classes are essentially rooted in economic conditions.⁵⁸ Ignoring Shari'ati's distinction, Akbari rejects the notion of 'belief classes'. He invokes the Marxist argument that classes are the product of material or economic relations between individuals, whereas ideas and beliefs are ideological relations and are therefore simple emanations of the real material base. Akbari concludes that 'belief classes' are 'figments of Mr Shari'ati's imagination' and 'have no real foundations nor have they ever existed in any society at any time.'⁵⁹

Shari'ati develops his concept of 'belief classes' in order to explain the emergence of what he considers to be the clerical class. He maintains that this powerful class has existed throughout history because the masses believed that an intermediary was needed to define and overlook their relation with God. Shari'ati explains that the clerical class generates a centralized, hidebound, change-resistant and repressive 'clerical institution' (*sazeman-e rowhaniyat*) which could in turn lead to reaction and the emergence of 'religious and clerical despotism.'⁶⁰ He points out that Islam condemns the emergence of a 'religious aristocracy' and its corollary. By deliberately categorizing the clergy as a variant of an oppressive class, Shari'ati wants to prompt his intellectual audience to draw the conclusion that the relation between the clerical institution and the masses cannot be anything but antagonistic. Bound by his ideological discourse, Akbari is forced to reject Shari'ati's broad conclusion on the clergy, the clerical institution and the contradiction between the masses and the clerical class. He argues that only the landowning clergy can be categorized as feudal landlords and subsequently despotic and reactionary while the non-landowning clergy must be considered as anti-feudal, anti-despotic and progressive.⁶¹ Ironically the Marxist becomes the protector of the clergy and the Islamist their bitter foe.

Second, in the tradition of Kasravi, Shari'ati attempts to undermine the long-held Shi'ite notion of intercession (*shafa'at*). He argues that it is not mediation [of an imam] that will determine the felicity or damnation of individuals, but their

own acts and innate qualities.⁶² Oblivious to the real purpose of Shari'ati's argument which is to reject the clerically held notion of mediation, Akbari argues that human qualities are not innate but the result of the individual's social and class position. Going off on a tangent, Akbari enquires, how can such effects become the cause of felicity or damnation?⁶³

Third, Shari'ati accuses the civilized nations of colonization, exploitation, enslavement, deception, injustice, corruption, aggression and war.⁶⁴ Akbari criticizes Shari'ati for his inability to distinguish between the Western countries and the capitalist classes in these countries. The absence of class analysis, Akbari argues, would lead to 'outrageous and unpardonable errors.'⁶⁵ Akbari argues that Shari'ati uses every occasion to attack and criticize capitalism in an 'unscientific' manner. Through this type of analysis he argues that Shari'ati whips up hatred and repugnance towards capitalism among his readers.⁶⁶ According to Akbari, colonialism has long tried to present Iran as a capitalist society and has consequently tried to substitute the false struggle against capitalism for the real struggle against colonialism and reaction.⁶⁷ Akbari tries to demonstrate that Iran is still in the pre-capitalist stage of development and since capitalism is a superior historical stage compared to feudalism, he concludes that the growth and expansion of capitalism in Iran is progressive and desirable.⁶⁸ In a scathing attack on Shari'ati, Akbari calls him 'a supporter of the landlords', and 'reactionary.'⁶⁹ He writes:

You admire the past, you are regressive. You oppose industry and the growth of technology in Iran. You have no liking for the sciences and consider modern civilization to be corrupt. You have labelled modern Man as corrupt and murderous. You search for morals and ethics in the past and believe that modern civilization will eradicate morals, ethics and religion. You wish to delay the forward movement of our society as much as possible.⁷⁰

It is ironic that Shari'ati was also of the opinion that his leftist opponents were in league with feudal-lords. He lamented that in 'an underdeveloped eastern country' such as Iran, the left intellectuals directed the 'sharp edge of their struggle and criticism not against feudalism and the landlords (*khan*), but towards philosophical idealism and God.'⁷¹

Finally in the last section of his book Akbari subjects Shari'ati to criticism, slander and ridicule. In a passing remark (in parenthesis) Shari'ati refers to a rather confused aggregation of historical stages of transformation as 'primitive stage, nomadic and pastoral stage, agricultural stage, civilized stage, feudalism, bourgeoisie.'⁷² Outraged by this erroneous presentation, Akbari accused Shari'ati of lacking in the most elementary and rudimentary knowledge of social problems.⁷³ In an emotional statement Akbari writes, 'Has anyone forced Mr Shari'ati to write on issues about which he does not know the first thing? Is he obliged to tire and poison the mind of readers with such pseudo-learned gibberish and rigmarole?'⁷⁴

The fact that Shari'ati used the language of the left in order to attract the young to a redefined Islam must have prompted Akbari to demonstrate the difference between Shari'ati's 'false radicalism and distorted Marxism' and the 'progressive

theory of scientific socialism'. It is also conceivable that, having read Shari'ati's *Eslamshenasi*, Akbari thought that Shari'ati's misrepresentation of Marxian ideas and analysis would confuse his readers, misguide them and thus prove harmful to the anti-shah movement. A more personal reason is also evoked which should be considered with caution. It is said that the 'Shari'ati phenomenon' at the University of Mashhad had started to bother Akbari.⁷⁵ In the course of a discussion between Shari'ati and Akbari at the university's cafeteria, Shari'ati is said to have reproached Akbari for his use of 'an official language', by which he meant the employment of the official Marxist language which was in vogue among sympathizers of the Tudeh party (which Akbari was not). Akbari, however, misunderstood the remark and was extremely offended. He had presumed that by 'an official language' Shari'ati had implied that Akbari was towing the 'government's line' and supporting the government's ideas and policy positions. Akbari had returned what he thought was an insult by enquiring whether he was using an 'official language' or Shari'ati?⁷⁶ The fact that this incident occurred before the appearance of Akbari's critique may indicate that it caused the article and ultimately his book.

In response, Shari'ati is said to have belittled Akbari's book by considering it a statement of personal animosity and even insinuating that it was the work of SAVAK.⁷⁷ Some of Shari'ati's students, however, remember that after the publication of Akbari's book, even in private circles, Shari'ati always spoke of him with respect.⁷⁸ In public Shari'ati never attacked Akbari on personal grounds. In the course of a lecture in 1972 when he was at the height of his popularity, Shari'ati differentiated between his ordinary detractors and Akbari. In his caustic style, Shari'ati referred to Akbari's book and said 'its author was a highly enlightened and intellectual friend' and added that 'of course his book does not represent his own personality and that his thoughts are far more valuable.'⁷⁹

The Revolutionary Left and Shari'ati

The revolutionary left's unofficial response to Shari'ati's lectures came in a letter from Amir-Parviz Puyan and Masud Ahmadzadeh in the autumn of 1968. Ne'mat Mirzazadeh was the courier between the old friends whose different ideologies had gradually estranged them. He recalls that having read the letter, Shari'ati had handed it over to him saying, 'see how this year's sparrows wish to teach those of last year.'⁸⁰ Shari'ati was referring to the fact that he was some thirteen years older than Puyan and Ahmadzadeh. The contents of the letter, which was written with a red ball-point pen and signed by both Puyan and Ahmadzadeh, included a number of objections to Shari'ati's ideas expressed in his classes and especially in *Eslamshenasi*.

First, they objected to the 'unscientific' and 'metaphysical' nature of Shari'ati's thought. In the Iranian political circles of the time, 'scientific theory' was the code word for socialism and 'metaphysical ideas' referred to religious or Islamic posi-

tions. In reality Shari'ati was being chided for presenting social problems through an Islamic rather than a purely Marxist-Leninist discourse. Second, they objected to Shari'ati's introduction of concepts and ideas that confused the youth in 'selecting the correct path to solving Iran's social problems'. In the letter, Shari'ati was accused of playing a deviant and schismatic role among the young. For Puyan and Ahmadzadeh, the assessment and critique of social problems from a religious perspective and the provision of 'progressive' solutions based on a particular Islamic interpretation was a deviant alternative to Marxism-Leninism. The fact that a Muslim could also lash out at capitalism and imperialism and call for a democratic and egalitarian society, threatened the Marxist-Leninist monopoly of social criticism and change. Third, Shari'ati was accused of wasting the revolutionary energy and potential of the youth by preoccupying and engaging their minds with abstract, pedantic and speculative matters rather than preparing them for radical and revolutionary political change. Fourth, Shari'ati was criticized and ridiculed for his superstitious beliefs and practices, especially his spiritualism. The letter referred to the fact that Shari'ati had participated in occult seances during which spirits were called forth at the University's dormitory. It was argued that such nonsensical activities could only deceive and mislead students, detracting them from revolutionary action, their supposedly primary concern. Finally, on a more personal note, the letter expressed Puyan and Ahmadzadeh's concern about Shari'ati's self-imposed loneliness and political isolation at the time.

Puyan's growing stature as a radical Marxist-Leninist intellectual enhanced the significance of his critique among Mashhad's leftist community. His disapproval of Shari'ati gradually became ever more acerbic and virulent. It is said that Puyan had implied that Shari'ati was an 'American agent' and a 'member of SAVAK'.⁸¹ Tolou, a close friend of both Puyan and Ahmadzadeh rejects the notion that Puyan made such a statement.⁸² He argues that at the time both might have believed that the end result of Shari'ati's activities would benefit the government, but he adds that 'we all knew Shari'ati well enough to know that he could not have been an agent.'

After Puyan's conversion to Marxism in 1966 and Masud Ahmadzadeh's conversion some two years later, a loosely knit cluster of revolutionary left students gradually took shape around them. Puyan, who was at the time studying in Tehran, travelled to Mashhad regularly and became acquainted with Bahman Ajang who had Marxist tendencies even before he entered Mashhad University. It was through Ajang that the Marxist circle primarily composed of students from Mashhad University was constituted. The main figures in this group, the members of which later constituted the Mashhad branch of the Peoples' Parda'ian Guerilla Organization of Iran, were Bahman Ajang, Hamid Tavakoli, Sa'id Aryan (Hamid's brother-in-law) and Ali-Reza Galavi, all of whom were Shari'ati's students.

The relationship between Shari'ati and his Marxist students, who exercised considerable influence among politicized students, was delicate. At first, Shari'ati was branded as 'an agent of the US, the CIA and the Pahlavi regime', and accused

of obstructing the imminent communist revolution in Iran.⁸³ Students taking his course for the first time were warned against his 'sweet talk', which was deemed unlearned, deceptive and politically dangerous. As time went by, however, Shari'ati made an impression on key members of the Marxian circle. Ajang, who took one of Shari'ati's courses and had very much moved his teacher with his final exam essay, soon came to the conclusion that all the rumours about Shari'ati's suspicious allegiances were completely baseless.⁸⁴ In Ajang's view, even though religion was reactionary, Shari'ati wished to modernize Islam. In the process of reviving a modernist Islam, Ajang believed that Shari'ati did not wish to engage the Marxists in a narrow-minded debate. Shari'ati's open-mindedness distinguished him from other religionists. Antipathy toward Shari'ati among the Marxists palpably declined, until at some point there was discussion among their members of the possibility of tactical alliances with Shari'ati. Based on the clear understanding that the two had incompatible ideologies and that 'water and oil could not mix', the Marxists gradually came to accept a critical yet amicable *modus vivendi* with Shari'ati and his followers.

The Marxists' non-antagonistic position towards Shari'ati did not mean intellectual non-engagement. In his classes and outside, Shari'ati came under considerable pressure from this group of students.⁸⁵ He was pressed to clarify his position on idealism and materialism, the historical stages of social development, the definition and essence of social classes and finally the historical role of religion as a catalyst of change. One of his students recalls that many leftist students, who were firm believers in armed struggle as the only justifiable means of political change, at times even abused Shari'ati's modesty and courtesy.⁸⁶ As soon as topics such as 'social class', 'materialism' and the 'role of religion' came up they discredited his ideas with their well prepared discourse. Shari'ati's classes became an arena for the revolutionary Marxists to practise their newly acquired arguments and theories. Shari'ati, however, enjoyed the challenge and allowed them to voice their opinions.

The Religious Establishment Reacts

On one of Shari'ati's trips to Tehran in the autumn of 1968, after the start of his irregular lectures at Ershad a group of well-wishing friends among whom were Motabedin, Bazargan, Motabhari and Palaturi visited him and his father.⁸⁷ At the time, *Eslamshenasi* was at the publishers. The group informed Shari'ati that some of his clerical enemies had already made a list of the errors and misinterpretations they had found in the text of his lecture-notes. He was also informed that Falsafi, a prominent preacher, had already attacked him from the pulpit and in Tabriz a few preachers had been incited to disparage him in the presence of Ayatollah Khosrowsbahi. Shari'ati was also told that a few bookshops had conspired to obstruct the distribution of his book in Tehran. In order to scupper the plans of his

enemies, this group hoped in vain that Shari'ati might alter his position on some of the issues raised. The group confronted Shari'ati with a number of problems in *Eslamshenasi*, which in their opinion were controversial. The topics were previously prepared with the help of Motabhari and Bazargan. It should be kept in mind that the issues raised were coming from members of the most open-minded Islamic circles of the time, themselves under pressure from the traditional Islamic circles.

First, according to Shari'ati, after the death of Mohammad human beings had to rely on their own intellect. The group felt that Shari'ati's statement, rejecting the need for edicts based on revelation, undermined the notion that Islam was an eternally valid and dynamic religion.⁸⁸ Second, Shari'ati had argued that during the fifteen years after his marriage, the Prophet had become an embourgeoisified conservative and a defender of the status quo.⁸⁹ The group opined that such a statement was 'absolute infidelity'. Third, in *Eslamshenasi* Shari'ati had rejected the commonly held notion of the Prophet's perfection and argued that the concept of evolution applied even to the Prophet, whom God always instructed to seek more knowledge. Shari'ati's well wishers argued that this position implied that even after his prophethood, Mohammad was still lacking or deficient.⁹⁰ Unsuccessful in convincing Shari'ati to modify or change some of the arguments in his book, the group left in desperation.

In contrast to the Left's swift rebuttal, the religious establishment's reaction to Shari'ati was very slow. Even though anxiety about the content of his lectures and *Eslamshenasi* was voiced in 1968, published clerical criticism did not appear until late 1971, nearly two years after the publication of *Eslamshenasi*. By this time Shari'ati had published numerous other books (mainly his lectures) and clerical criticism was, therefore, directed at both those works and *Eslamshenasi*. Once, however, the first pamphlet and book attacking Shari'ati appeared a long streak of condemnations, villifications and denunciations followed from clerical quarters.

Among the books written by Shari'ati's Islamic antagonists, *Eslamshenasi dar Tarazu-ye Elm va Aql* (Islamology Judged Rationally and Scientifically) by Ebrahim Ansari-e Zanjani focused only on *Eslamshenasi*. The book, which appeared in January 1973, addressed the major problems of *Eslamshenasi* from the point of view of the traditional Shi'i clergy. Ansari-e Zanjani arranged his criticism under three main headings; first, Shari'ati's errors on Islamic issues, second his errors on Shi'ism and finally his position on the clergy.⁹¹

Under the rubric of Shari'ati's errors on Islamic issues, Ansari-e Zanjani presented three major arguments. First, he challenged Shari'ati's position on *khatemiyat* or the finality of Prophethood after Mohammad. This point was similar to that raised by the group of well wishers. Shari'ati had argued that Mohammad's claim to being the last Prophet did not mean that his teachings sufficed mankind until eternity. He argued that after Mohammad, human beings attained a stage in their evolution which enabled them to conduct their affairs on the basis of reason. At this stage they no longer needed to be guided by revelation.

Therefore, Shari'ati argued that after Mohammad, reason replaced revelations as a guide to proper conduct.⁹² Ansari-e Zanjani argued that human reason could never develop to a stage where it could act independently, promulgating perfect laws without reference to or based on revelations. He contended that according to both Shi'a and Sunnis the formulation and promulgation of laws was the monopoly of God and Shari'ati's attempt at divorcing law from its divine origin was 'sheer infidelity (*kuf'r*) and in contradiction with Islam'.⁹³

Second, Ansari-e Zanjani contested the Islamic justification of Shari'ati's opinion on the equality of men and women. However, he added that since later in the book Shari'ati himself had dismissed his earlier contention and had admitted that Islam did not believe in gender equality, there was no point in pursuing this matter.⁹⁴ On the issue of polygamy and the veil, which Shari'ati had condemned as distasteful and humiliating in the modern age, Ansari-e Zanjani characterized Shari'ati's position as one which 'condemned God and subordinated Him to the rule of His subjects'.⁹⁵ He accused Shari'ati of being both 'ignorant and irreligious'.⁹⁶ Furthermore, he suggested that under the influence of Europeans Shari'ati had rallied against his own 'national practices and traditions'.⁹⁷ In a more provocative tone he submitted that Shari'ati's defence of unveiled women was an apology for sexual promiscuity which he implied was practised at Hosseiniyeh Ershad.⁹⁸

Third, on freedom of thought in Islam, Ansari-e Zanjani argued that in the field of principles of religion, those things that have been made permissible and those that have been categorized as forbidden by the Qur'an and the Prophet will remain fixed until eternity and there can therefore be no room for the application of human thought.⁹⁹ Shari'ati's assertion that freedom of thought constituted a basis of Islam was repudiated by Ansari-e Zanjani who argued that even in cases where the application of independent thought was permissible it was only within the domain of the religious experts or *ulema* to pass judgement. He labelled the intervention of non-experts such as Shari'ati as 'a great mistake and an unforgivable sin'.¹⁰⁰

With reference to Shari'ati's errors in Shi'ism, Ansari-e Zanjani attempted to demonstrate that he not only used Sunni references to prove his arguments, but also sought to vindicate Abu Bakr and Omar from all the charges brought against them by the Shi'a. He pointed out that Shari'ati's use of the two Qur'anic verses on the topic of consultation (*showra*) to justify and promote elections on the basis of majority vote was incorrect.¹⁰¹ Whereas Shari'ati had attempted to prove that Abu Bakr's election as the first caliph was based on democratic procedures, which he tried to promote as one of Islam's socio-political principles, Ansari-e Zanjani argued that the choice of the first caliph was the responsibility of the Prophet and not the people.¹⁰² In accordance with mainstream Shi'i thought he argued that the Prophet had designated Ali as his successor at Qadir. Ansari-e Zanjani held those who disobeyed the will of the Prophet and participated in the 'ominous council and the sinister democracy' responsible for all the misfortunes that had befallen the Islamic community after the death of the Prophet.¹⁰³

The validity of Shari'ati's account of the Prophet's contentment, just before his death, at the sight of Abu Bakr leading the congregational prayers was attacked by Ansari-e Zanjani. He contended that the report (*hadith*) on which Shari'ati had based his argument was invalid since it was considered a weak *hadith* and the reporter was of dubious reputation.¹⁰⁴ On the basis of Shi'i sources, Ansari-e Zanjani argued that the Prophet sent for Ali to lead the prayers and when Abu Bakr disregarded the Prophet's will and led the prayers himself the Prophet pushed him aside angrily and took over.¹⁰⁵ In a lengthy chapter, Ansari-e Zanjani demonstrated the evils of Abu Bakr and Omar. He claimed that Ali Shari'ati, his father Mohammad-Taqi and the Hosseiniyeh Ershad had always attempted to prove the piety of Abu Bakr and Omar while covering up the 'betrayals and villainies' of these two caliphs.¹⁰⁶

Concerning Shari'ati's position on the clergy, Ansari-e Zanjani argued that the whole purpose of writing *Eslamshenasi* had been to slander, vilify, attack and destroy them.¹⁰⁷ He rejected Shari'ati's notion that the clergy in Islam were intermediaries and that their necessity hinged on this function.¹⁰⁸ In response to Shari'ati's claim that the clergy's privileges were undeserved and that they constituted a hegemonic, dictatorial force over the people and that this situation gave rise to inequality, he claimed that since the clergy were steeped in science and knowledge it was only natural and fair that they would not be equal to others.¹⁰⁹ Regarding Shari'ati's contention that an official clerical institution (*sazeman-e rasmi-e rowhaniyat*) has no place in Islam, Ansari-e Zanjani claimed that if by the 'official clerical institution' Shari'ati alluded to an all-clergy institution, he would concur with Shari'ati. However, the criteria for membership was not the clerical garb but the educational process necessary for such a position. He argued that even people such as Shari'ati or Bazargan who did not wear the religious garb could become members of this institution only if they were to study the required texts with experts in the field of religious science.¹¹⁰ Shari'ati's characterization of the clergy as hidebound and narrow-minded was rejected by Ansari-e Zanjani, who argued that they were the defenders of the faith and acted according to the dictates of Islam.¹¹¹ In conclusion Shari'ati was accused of being in the service of Saudi Arabian Wahhabis and regurgitating old and deviant ideas.¹¹² Shari'ati was also threatened and reminded that in Islam deviants are initially invited to understand the truth through debate; but if they continue to dispute the truth, then force would have to be used against them.¹¹³

Later, though wounded, Shari'ati lamented that among his detractors it was only Seyyed Ebrahim Ansari-e Zanjani who he would never forgive for having slandered and defamed the women who had attended his lectures. Enraged at the accusation that the women at Ershad were simply there to engage in 'sexual promiscuity', Shari'ati warned, 'woe if there be a tommorrow after today'.¹¹⁴ Even a 'hireling and a slut,' he wrote, 'would not be so unscrupulous as to make such accusations'.¹¹⁵

A Cat and Mouse Game

'I have fallen prey to the hunter, his arrow pursues me'

On 8 January 1968 Gholamreza Takhti, the 1956 Olympic champion of middle-heavy free-style wrestling and a popular hero, admired for his chivalry and his National Front activities, died in dubious circumstances. The Iranian press reported his death as a suicide, a claim that, irrespective of its validity, was never believed by the people. Takhti was given a hero's burial.

Takhti's death provided an ideal occasion for students across Iran to vent their anti-regime feelings and at Mashhad University's politicized Faculty of Medicine they decided to commemorate the fortieth day (*cheleh*). In solidarity, a few students at the Faculty of Literature also produced a bulletin in which Ne'mat Mirzazadeh's poem, 'An obituary for Takhti', was to be published.¹ Three hundred copies of the bulletin were printed in Mashhad and Mosaddeq Rashti, a student of the Faculty of Literature, was given the responsibility of transporting them to Tehran. The airplane ticket to Tehran came to 300 tomans. Unable to shoulder the expenses, Mosaddeq Rashti went to Shari'ati, whom he knew well, to solicit a donation. Fishing around in his pockets, Shari'ati found 65 tomans, from which he contributed 60.

On 26 February 1968, a meeting to commemorate the foundation of the Iranian Peoples' Party was held at Mosaddeq Rashti's home. From nine in the evening the guests began to arrive. Eleven people attended among them Delasa'i, Fazlinejad, Abbas Elahi, Asghar Elahi, Hashem Elahi, Mojtaba Jazayeri, Cyrus Sahami and Ali Shari'ati. Some of them, including Sahami, were not at first aware of the fact that they were attending a political meeting of the Iranian Peoples' Party.² Discussions continued until two in the morning. Shari'ati referred to his experiences in France and argued that success in political struggle was only possible through a relentless educational campaign. He criticized the type of political struggle conducted in Iran and argued that the only alternative was to create a conducive militant environment in the universities. People, he said, had to be compelled to think. His own political vocation was to pose problems and provoke contradictions in the minds of his students. Rejecting the importance of organizational activities at that time, Shari'ati argued that his most important contribution was what he did in the classroom. Abbas Elahi and Shari'ati were at loggerheads over the correct

strategy for effecting political change. At this time Shari'ati called for a gradual process of change based on raising the consciousness of the people, while Elahi called for political activism. Mosaddeq Rashti recalled that the meeting ended inconclusively and the participants left in an atmosphere of ill feeling.³

A week after this meeting, the students at the University of Mashhad, particularly from the Faculties of Medicine and Literature, planned a strike to protest cuts in the university's budget.⁴ Although Shari'ati had advised against the strike, the students proceeded with their plan on 6 March 1968. The next day SAVAK began rounding up suspected leaders. Some fifty-two students, mostly from the Faculty of Medicine, were arrested. Mosaddeq Rashti recalls that on his arrival at the University, Jalal Matini, the head of the Faculty of Literature, informed him that he should report to SAVAK's headquarters in Mashhad.

Mosaddeq Rashti was subsequently arrested, interrogated and transferred to the Army's prison, where he was incarcerated for seven and a half months. Among those arrested and detained was Ali-Akbar Maghmumi, a third-year student at the Faculty of Medicine. Mojtaba Jazayeri, who was recruiting Maghmumi to the Iranian Peoples' Party, had told him about Mosaddeq Rashti's and Shari'ati's involvement in the publication of the bulletins and with the student strikes.⁵ According to a letter from the chief of SAVAK in Khorasan to the chief of SAVAK in Tehran, in his interrogations Maghmumi had accepted the charge that he and the students arrested had been involved with Communist activities.⁶ Maghmumi had also indicated that the dissident students had been in contact with Ali Shari'ati through Mosaddeq Rashti.⁷ Even though, Mosaddeq Rashti dismissed Maghmumi's claims and the other detainees also attested that Shari'ati had not been involved with any subversive activities, he was summoned to SAVAK for an 'interview', a euphemism for interrogation.⁸ According to Mosaddeq Rashti, SAVAK was primarily seeking the authors of the bulletin on Takhti.

After his return to Iran and his first detention at the border and eventual imprisonment in Tehran, this was the first time Shari'ati had been summoned by the security forces. Published SAVAK documents on Shari'ati indicate that there were no contacts between him and SAVAK between 1964 and 1968 when he was interrogated over the Takhti affair. Nor is there any trace of SAVAK's mediation or intercession on his behalf during this period.⁹ All claims, therefore, that SAVAK played a role in Shari'ati's employment at the University of Mashhad, or had obtained his promise of collaboration before he was allowed to teach seem completely unfounded and malicious.¹⁰

On 31 July 1968, Brigadier-General Bahrami, the chief of Khorasan's SAVAK dispatched what he called 'a written statement obtained (*akhz*)' from Shari'ati, subsequent to 'his summons to SAVAK and his interview'.¹¹ Attempts have been made to claim that Shari'ati's statement during his interrogation was an attempt to befriend the authorities through an unsolicited 'letter' from him to SAVAK; but the wording of Bahrami's letter is undeniable proof that the document was written under duress, as all interrogations are, and that it was not a friendly 'letter'.¹²

Before discussing Shari'ati's interrogation statements, it should be pointed out that almost all Shari'ati's dossier at SAVAK has been published by Sayyed Hamid Rowhani, an adversary of Shari'ati's who until recently had a monopoly over such documents. Although one may feel confident that what Rowhani has selectively published is factual, what he has chosen not to publish and the numerous cases of 'surgery'¹³ he has performed on the published documents detract from their value and the conclusions that can be drawn from them. They are, however, valuable in the sense that it can be said with a high degree of certainty that Rowhani has compiled the most 'incriminating' documents he could find in the dossier. Researchers are therefore insured against the possibility of later revelations that would prove that Shari'ati was more 'compromising and appeasing' to the regime than it appears from Rowhani's selected documents. Public access to the SAVAK documents will probably enhance Shari'ati's image. However, the future emergence of statements which were removed by his partisans from Shari'ati's dossier after the revolution, may some day provide some surprises. The fact that certain documents were indeed removed is proven by their occasional publication in personal memoirs published in Iran.

Interrogations

In his interrogations, Shari'ati presents himself as a man discontented with the situation in his country and pessimistic about its future. Shari'ati wrote that his words represented the response of educated youth to questions such as; what do you think? why were you an opponent of the regime? and what do you think of the new domestic and foreign policies? Questions posed by a regime that has undergone a transformation in its thinking and its policies and one which had embarked on a programme to reform different aspects of society.¹⁴ Subsequently, in response to the questions of his interrogators, Shari'ati wrote a long-winded and selectively detailed autobiography. In it he spoke about his father; the role and significance of the Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truths; the anti-Tudeh activities of the Centre; his youth; his anti-Tudeh activities; his faith in Mosaddeq and his supporters as reformers, nationalists, anti-feudalists and defenders of social justice; his opposition to clandestine activities and his support for public and legal political activities; his arrest in 1957; his negative feelings about SAVAK during the time of Bakhtiar and his positive impression of the security forces after his arrest in 1957; his departure to Paris; his political activities in Paris; his disagreements with fellow students and activists over political tactics and strategy; his arrest and imprisonment after his return to Iran; his gratitude towards the agents who arrested him and those who interrogated him.¹⁵ In the last part of his statement, he presented what he called 'a new scientific and sociological analysis of the Iranian ruling class and his Imperial Majesty the Shahanshah who stood at its apex'.¹⁶ Shari'ati argued that this analysis provided a key to his political philosophy.

In a startling manner, Shari'ati's description of the political situation in Iran resembled what is called a 'Bonapartist state' in Marxian jargon.

The 'Bonapartist state' according to both Marx and Engels was primarily characterized by the state's high degree of independence from social classes, or what Poulantzas called the 'relative autonomy of the state vis-à-vis the dominant classes or fractions'.¹⁷ The two other distinguishing features of a Bonapartist state are the state's role as a mediator and arbitrator between warring classes, intervening against or in favour of the economic interests of one or another class only to realize its own political interests and the determining and absolutist role of the Emperor (ruler).

Shari'ati argued that the ruling class in Iran was neither dependent on, nor did it represent, the economic interests of any particular social class.¹⁸ The shah, Shari'ati argued, was a supra-class figure, free of all class attachments. In Iran, he suggested, one could argue that a 'ruling class' did not exist. Therefore, all classes could conceivably benefit from fundamental transformations without resorting to violence and engaging in revolutionary activity. Shari'ati referred to the social reforms that had occurred in Iran since 1964 and argued that, based on the decision of one individual (*shakhs-e ishan*), feudal lords, who had constituted Iran's ruling class and whose demise had seemed impossible, were suddenly smashed and Iran's social and class structure fundamentally altered.¹⁹ What made the Iranian state unique, Shari'ati argued, was the fact that such a social transformation had occurred without a change in Iran's political form or a change of regime. Shari'ati believed that the reforms proved that the shah's regime was capable of manipulating Iran's class structure to its advantage by strengthening, weakening or even annihilating any class that it willed. Based on expediency and its own interests and irrespective of the economic strength and stature of a particular class, Shari'ati maintained that the regime could sacrifice a class, irrespective of its strength, and thus adopt a revolutionary posture. On the basis of these arguments, he claimed that 'the underprivileged and disinherited (*mahrums*) classes in Iran could be optimistic about the abolition of class discrimination and the realization of their social and class objectives within the present political framework and without resorting to violence and opting for a revolution'.²⁰

Shari'ati was therefore arguing that it was possible to achieve radical and revolutionary goals without resorting to revolutionary violence. Indirectly he implied that the educated and discontented Iranian youth expected fundamental steps towards the improvement of the economic conditions of the disinherited. Shrewdly, Shari'ati stated that the 'abolition of class discrimination', which was his primary objective, could also become the objective of the regime. In a way, he was telling the regime what he believed was in its best interests.

Realizing that his statement could be construed as a prescription, and thus enrage the regime he followed up on his thinly veiled, rather unrealistic suggestion by hinting that the shah was both open to new ideas and in favour of supporting the interests of the disinherited classes. He added that, 'his Imperial Majesty has

definitely decided to introduce as many radical social transformations as possible and wherever possible.' In an advisory but wishful tone he said, 'I am certain that the grounds and conditions for the acceptance of all novel and revolutionary projects, which would reform the present situation, are to a large extent prepared and available.'²¹

In another astute move, instead of denial and dissimulation, Shari'ati informed and prepared the security forces for his future activities. This became a rather odd and inexplicable hallmark of all his important interrogations. He admitted how glad he was that under the prevailing conditions he could express and divulge all the inspirations and ideals that he had, for a long time, developed and kept secret in his heart or at best referred to in symbolic forms. 'Under the present circumstances, I can discuss my ideas and ideals wherever I want. I can say it publicly and loudly and I can demand it with the certainty that it would be accorded.'²² Shari'ati concluded by adding that he remained a serious observer of the rapid and radical social transformations in Iran and once again added that he believed that the attainment of revolutionary objectives was possible within Iran's political system.²³

The use of the theory of a Bonapartist state and its application to the conditions of Iran in 1969 allowed him to voice his major concerns and ideals without pitting himself against the power of the state and inviting the wrath of the security services. It allowed him to affirm and explain the social reforms undertaken by the regime. Shari'ati instead made the state and the shah accomplices to his own designs. In his interrogation, instead of denying his principle political objective of 'abolishing class discriminations', the blunt affirmation of which would have allowed the authorities to brand him as a 'communist', he reaffirmed his objective and presented it as a desirable objective which the shah and his regime should be interested in and eventually adopt. Shari'ati defended his Mosaddeqist past and Mosaddeq's policies and objectives. He made believe that the shah's Iran was a democracy where he could openly express his beliefs and his opinions. How could anyone dare say that it was not? Thus Shari'ati paved the ground for his future activities.

Shari'ati's interrogation statement, however, also included appeasing words and sometimes double-edged praise. He explained how the 'prompt and indiscriminate attention' given to their case by SAVAK, when they were arrested in 1957, 'left a good impression [on the detainees]'.²⁴ He lauded the 'proper conduct, kindness and good manners' of the two agents who accompanied them to Tehran after he was arrested.²⁵ Shari'ati pointed out that, instead of being 'intimidated and scared' by the security agents, as was the case in the past, his interrogators 'tried to hold a dialogue, discuss and convince' him!²⁶

Shari'ati, who knew that he was considered a conspirator against the security of the state, wished to minimize his anti-regime political activities, focus on his pro-government activities, while emphasizing his scholarly and theoretical approach to politics. He therefore made certain declarations that were aimed at misguiding the security forces and getting himself off the hook. Shari'ati disclaimed

his participation in political demonstrations, sit-ins and political activities while in France.²⁷ Referring to his radio programmes in Mashhad during 1954, he insinuated that his speeches were against the Tudeh party and communism.²⁸ To enhance his academic stature with the security forces, he also credited himself with certain false attributes such as having obtained two doctorates, having worked at France's highly reputable National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and having been Professor Berque's assistant.²⁹

On the basis of Shari'ati's statement, Bahrami informed SAVAK headquarters that 'if this individual [Shari'ati] was properly guided and directed, he would become a positive element [an asset] for the country'.³⁰ From the SAVAK documents published by Rowhani there seems to have been no reports by SAVAK concerning Shari'ati between July 1968 until April 1969.

From Autumn 1968, Shari'ati was invited by various universities across Iran to deliver speeches and lectures. His first guest lecture was on 6 November 1968 at the Petroleum University of Abadan, where he spoke on the 'Psychology of technique'. Shari'ati recalls that after his lecture around 1000 students gathered at the university cafeteria for an informal discussion and at the end some of them chanted anti-regime and revolutionary slogans.³¹ From Abadan he flew to Tehran, where he started his lecture at the Melli University at six o'clock in the afternoon and finished at one in the morning.³²

From the regime's point of view, Shari'ati's lectures must have had a disquieting or subversive content. It is also possible that SAVAK's decision-makers were advised by its informers who attended the lectures that Shari'ati's oratory was provoking undesirable political reactions among his audience. Alerted by Shari'ati's talks, in a letter dated 11 April 1969, Tehran's SAVAK instructed its Mashhad office to probe into the modality and the process by which Shari'ati had come to be invited by the universities in which he had lectured.³³ Clearly SAVAK was not only uninformed about Shari'ati's lectures but was angered enough to investigate why he was being issued with so many invitations. Having 'interviewed' Shari'ati, in a report Bahrami responded to SAVAK's inquiry. He wrote that, according to Shari'ati, when he had been invited by Dr Puyan the chancellor of the Melli University, Mr Khosrow Hedayat, vice-president of the National Iranian Oil Company, the chancellor of Tabriz University, and other university chancellors, he [Shari'ati] had assumed that the programmes had been arranged with the prior knowledge of SAVAK, especially since some of those university chancellors even welcomed him personally at the airport. According to Bahrami, Shari'ati had said that, 'since SAVAK was aware of the fact that he was fighting on two fronts (the clergy and the left) and that he was presenting a new idea, he thought that it [SAVAK] had planned to take advantage of his scientific lectures.' Having realized that SAVAK was not informed, Shari'ati had inquired why, instead of asking the gentlemen who had invited him, SAVAK was reproaching him.³⁴ According to Bahrami, Shari'ati had added that he was subordinated (*moti'*) to the system (*dastgah*), a firm believer in the country and willing to serve. Shari'ati had reportedly said that the decision to

use or not to use him depended on the opinion of higher authorities (*maqamat-e 'alieh*). He is said to have concluded that, 'from now on whenever I am invited I will inform SAVAK'.³⁵

The Ban on Public Lectures

Notwithstanding their order that Shari'ati should report his invitations, on 22 April 1969 Tehran's SAVAK formally prohibited him from delivering any more public lectures without its knowledge and approval.³⁶ Khorasan's SAVAK was informed of this decision and was instructed to convey the interdiction to Shari'ati. The issue of his lectures tours and their popularity at various Iranian universities within only six months, brought Shari'ati once again under the close scrutiny of Iran's security forces.

In a report to Tehran's SAVAK on 25 April 1969, Bahrami pointed out that before having received the 'above edict' (*amriyeh foq*) Shari'ati had been informed that he should not accept any further invitations to lecture without the prior permission of SAVAK.³⁷ The 'above edict' probably referred to the conditional ban on Shari'ati's lectures. From the content of Bahrami's report it becomes clear that Shari'ati had been again questioned by Khorasan's SAVAK on all his lecture engagements. According to Bahrami's report, Shari'ati had been invited to lecture at Tehran University on 27 April and had also been invited to speak at Hosseiniyeh Ershad and the Students' Islamic Association while he was in Tehran. In his report, Bahrami opined that:

As it has been repeatedly reported, Dr Shari'ati is very useful to foreign agents and extremist elements, he would, however, be more useful to SAVAK and the country if he were properly managed. This person is very knowledgeable, he is unacceptable to extremist clerics while leftists trust him. Khorasan's SAVAK believes that curbing Dr Shari'ati would result in his loss of faith in the system (*dastgah*) and the country and since he has many supporters, this may have undesirable results, yet if he were controlled by a well organised programme and project, in view of his novel ideas, he could become useful.³⁸

Aside from Bahrami's lucidity it is clear that, by this time, SAVAK in Khorasan was in disagreement with Tehran over the extent of the danger presented by Shari'ati and the method of dealing with him. Bahrami was probably well informed about Shari'ati's popularity, which led him to believe that Shari'ati's ideas would eventually weaken whatever hold leftist and traditionalist religious tendencies had on university students. Bahrami, however, could not go beyond the evident and assess the long-run impact of Shari'ati's lectures. Even though Tehran was interested in the damage that Shari'ati could do to the cause of the leftists and the religious establishment, it was clever enough to be suspicious of the galvanizing and arousing content and tone of his seemingly anti-leftist and anti-clerical discourse.

In response to Bahrami, General Moqaddam, the powerful head of SAVAK's

Third Bureau, reiterated that since Shari'ati had a 'damaging past' and 'it was not yet clear whether from a political point of view he was a healthy element or not,' he should not accept any invitations to lecture.³⁹ Moqaddam added that irrespective of what Shari'ati had thought, 'his invitations to lecture at various universities were not with the prior knowledge of SAVAK'.⁴⁰ After less than three months of vacillation, the decision to finally place a complete ban on Shari'ati's lectures at various gatherings until further notice was formally documented.⁴¹

In a report from the 312th division of SAVAK to Sabeti, it is explained that in view of Shari'ati's affiliation with the National Front and the fact that 'his speeches were not in the students' interest,' Shari'ati had been informed that he should refrain from accepting invitations to lecture at universities.⁴² The report referred to Shari'ati's controversial statement in his initial lengthy 'interview' that, 'I [Shari'ati] prefer to think that it is not I who has changed but the government that has changed its practices'.⁴³ It also alluded to the content of Shari'ati's other interviews with Khorasan's SAVAK in which he had mentioned that due to Shahanshah Aryamehr's concern, contrary to its previous practice, the system wished to free the intellectuals and university students from their state of mental subjugation and repression. The report, dated 13 July 1969 (22/4/48), clearly influenced by Bahrami's analysis of Shari'ati, suggested that Shari'ati, 'who has a considerable number of followers and is a learned person, can be beneficially utilized if he is properly guided'.⁴⁴

To assess the extent to which SAVAK could co-opt or use Shari'ati, the report sought permission to summon Shari'ati to Tehran's SAVAK for a 'discussion'. In this report the information conveyed by Mashhad's SAVAK to the effect that Shari'ati would be in Tehran by 1 August and would by then have completed a document containing his 'principles, ideas and objectives' is repeated.⁴⁵ Under pressure about his motives, according to a report from Bahrami to Tehran's SAVAK, Shari'ati seems to have promised to write a statement in which he would expound his 'principles, ideas and objectives'.⁴⁶ This statement was not written until after Shari'ati's meeting with Sabeti in Tehran. At this stage, having banned Shari'ati from lecturing anywhere outside Mashhad University, Tehran's SAVAK was willing to assess the validity of Bahrami's case concerning the possibility of using him in the interest of the regime. In a telegram to Khorasan, the office was instructed to inform Shari'ati that he should contact Tehran's SAVAK through Mr E. N., phone number 762817, and that his date of departure to Tehran be reported by a telegram.⁴⁷

Even though Shari'ati was summoned to Tehran's SAVAK he did not make contact on the scheduled date and the authorities were somewhat upset about the delay. In a letter dated 22 September 1969 after Shari'ati's meeting with SAVAK officials in Tehran and his return to Mashhad, Bahrami tried to explain Shari'ati's tardiness.⁴⁸ From the letter it can be determined that Shari'ati finally met with Attarpur (Hosseinzadeh) for a few minutes and was then interrogated or 'interviewed' by Sabati for some four hours.⁴⁹

Sabeti was the towering figure of SAVAK. Better known to the Iranian people by his euphemistic title of *maqam-e amniyati* (the security authority), he featured on television programmes during which captured political activists were 'interviewed' and recanted. He was the key man responsible for tracking down, capturing, extracting confessions and meting out punishments to political dissidents, activists and revolutionaries. Sabeti's official position was that of the 'Head of the First Bureau of Operations and Investigations.' The fact that he had personally spent four hours interrogating Shari'ati proved that the security forces were both curious and anxious about him.

The purpose of the interview was to 'discern the objectives' of Shari'ati.⁵⁰ It is clear that Sabeti was unable to detect Shari'ati's true intentions, his real convictions and the degree to which he could be relied on to further the interests of the regime. Shari'ati's typical style of evading clear answers by engaging in long-winded philosophizing and paternalistic advice to his pursuers while clearly avoiding the use of radical and revolutionary clichés, usually made it difficult for his interrogators to diagnose him. Sabeti, however, was not Bahrami who could be tamed easily by sweet words. He was neither fooled nor convinced of Shari'ati's harmlessness, let alone his usefulness. To decide on whether the ban on Shari'ati's outside talks and lectures should continue he needed more information. So during his 'interview' in Tehran, 'it was suggested [by Sabeti] that Shari'ati should write his ideas, programmes and future plans' in relation to his objective of introducing and launching a new Islamic discourse.⁵¹

The only evidence of this document, which Shari'ati wrote after his return to Mashhad and before 22 September 1969 (31/6/48) are four butchered original manuscripts which Rowhani has selectively cut and pasted from a ten-page document in addition to approximately six type-written pages claimed to be copied from the original.⁵² This document is most probably the written script of an interrogation session at SAVAK headquarters in Mashhad, since first a question is asked, followed by Shari'ati's answer and a relevant follow up question. For example, in response to the question, 'in relation to the past could you explain the transformation in your thoughts?' Shari'ati expounds on how thoughts are composed of two dimensions, first ideals and then the means of attaining those ideals.⁵³ He then states that he remains steadfast to his ideals of securing progress, welfare and honour for his country, yet his views on the means of attaining those goals were constantly undergoing change as time, his situation, outlook and internal and external conditions changed. Subsequent to Shari'ati's answer a closely related question is posed, 'what are these ever changing conditions; comparing the present to the past what changes have occurred?', to which he repeated that it was not he who had changed but the government and the socio-political conditions.⁵⁴

In a most revealing statement of intentions, Shari'ati candidly outlined his ideals and objectives. He told his interrogators that he was in favour of 'Iran's independence from political and economic tutelage to foreigners, social transformation; a change in the ugly, worn-out and unjust social relations; an endeavour

to familiarize and enlighten all social strata and classes to their rights; the ability of all to benefit from education, culture and social rights; an improvement in the level of civilization, industry, culture and public wealth of society and a struggle against superstitious ideas and reactionary traditions which had caused the stagnation and demise of society'.⁵⁵

To effect such changes, however, Shari'ati shifted from hazardous political to safer cultural means of struggle. The new generation, he believed, was more in need of 'correct and proper intellectual nourishment' than a 'political struggle'.⁵⁶ He rejected standard political activities as 'useless', a 'waste of time and manpower' and 'incapable of achieving' their stated objectives. In inoffensive, even appeasing terms, he said the responsibility of those who wished to 'serve their society' was to 'save young people from Westoxication' and to familiarize them with their 'racial and national heritage'. Hammering at the safe topics of reviving the new generation's 'lost self' and freeing Islam from its 'reactionary and superstitious' past, Shari'ati, maintained his posture as a provocative reformer, whose objectives were not bothersome to SAVAK.⁵⁷

Referring to the ban on his lectures, Shari'ati lamented that they had been misconstrued by the authorities simply because they had attracted very large audiences.⁵⁸ At the end of his interrogation, Shari'ati wrote one of his simple yet enigmatic lines, from which different people could infer whatever they wished. He wrote 'I am not insisting that you should permit me what you would not like me to do, but I insist that you should not charge me with an accusation which I have never appreciated'.⁵⁹

After about six months of inquiries, cross-examinations, 'interviews' and interrogations, a memorandum signed by Attarpur, Sabeti and Moqaddam, dated 7 October 1969, declared the non-opposition of SAVAK to Shari'ati's lectures at the gatherings to which he was invited.⁶⁰ The memorandum, however, ordered Khorasan to closely control his conduct and scrutinize his speeches and to ensure that they included 'useful material on the current reforms in the country'.⁶¹ Khorasan's SAVAK was further instructed to secure Shari'ati's 'cooperation', to 'guide and use' him and to report the result of his activities to Tehran's SAVAK.

Although Shari'ati was allowed to lecture he was under constant surveillance. On numerous occasions he was summoned to provide 'explanations'. As much as he stalled, he was eventually forced to show up and talk his way out of the situation.⁶² On 30 November 1969, during a lecture at the Faculty of Literature at Mashhad, Shari'ati said 'see how these seemingly important people with fat yet empty heads, devoid of character and all else try so hard to satisfy the interests of their masters'.⁶³ The statement was a thinly veiled snipe at the shah. Tehran's SAVAK was immediately briefed by its informants and inquired about the meaning of the sentence. Asked by Khorasan's SAVAK to explain his statement, Shari'ati shrewdly argued that by 'these seemingly important people', he meant those who were returning to Iran from abroad and having forgotten their glorious past copied the foreigners!⁶⁴ In the midst of his verbose and tautological response on the

importance of Iran's glorious past, as if humouring the SAVAK, he suddenly said that 'we should learn about Cyrus the Great's period since he was the first learned and mighty leader who inscribed the Human Rights Charter.'⁶⁵

From February 1970 until March 1972 there are no published documents on SAVAK's position, opinion or correspondence on Shari'ati. However, towards the end of September 1971 Shari'ati's employment at the University of Mashhad was terminated at the behest of SAVAK, which must have finally decided that his presence on the university scene was undesirable and his influence among the students injurious to national interests. Having failed to secure his 'cooperation', SAVAK must have come to the conclusion that Shari'ati could neither be 'guided' nor 'used' properly in the interest of the regime. In a way SAVAK's decision to terminate Shari'ati's employment at Mashhad University was an attempt by this office to redress the mistake they had committed in their evaluation, estimation and analysis.

A Mind Under Pressure

Shari'ati's passion for communication was not limited to his lectures, speeches or writings primarily addressed to a particular public. He often wrote an account of his thoughts, his mental dilemmas, the problems that he encountered, the solutions that he pondered on and his own mental tug of war and disputations. In these accounts, appropriately entitled *Dialogues of Solitude*, Shari'ati reveals his most intimate thoughts and feelings.⁶⁶ His candid narratives, although seldom dated and therefore difficult to place in a precise historical perspective, allow for a fairly accurate description of his state of mind and preoccupations.

A few months before his entanglement with SAVAK over the 'Takhti Affair' in early 1968, Shari'ati was in a melancholic and unsettled mood. This was a period when he was torn between two types of engagement each requiring its own particular mode of behaviour and terms of social existence. While his deeply-felt gnosticism and quest for inner knowledge required spiritual retreat, seclusion and an abandonment of people and their fate, his political convictions and sense of social commitment commanded him to become engaged in politics and lead the life of an activist if not a revolutionary. As a result, he remained undecided on the correct political course of action.

Shari'ati lamented that he was constantly reproached by friends for his disheartening words and his pessimism, which was said to discourage the young from political activity. In private, he conceded that his friends were right, but argued that he had already travelled the path of political activism and knew that the destination of fellow-travellers was nothing but death.⁶⁷ The dilemma was whether to tell the truth, gratify the enemy and dishearten friends, or to delude the young by trumpeting promises with fatal consequences. His decision at the time was to accept all accusations, rebukes and slanders yet remain honest and avoid what he believed to be falsities. He accepted the fact that his honesty may cost him his

fame and past reputation. 'I did not want to and could not deceive others for my own sake.'⁶⁸

Shari'ati believed that the radical and revolutionary youth who accused him of political inactivity 'lacked political experience and the maturity required for struggle.'⁶⁹ Respectful towards their intentions and their love for freedom and independence, he warned that in the late 1960s, 'revolutionary conditions were not yet ripe' and that premature revolutionary action would 'awaken the government', 'render it more coercive' and subsequently 'delay the revolution'.⁷⁰ As a result of premature political activities, Shari'ati argued that the revolutionary youth were 'denied the relative freedoms they possessed in the past' and were 'forbidden to speak and write'.⁷¹ Caught between what was considered politically correct among radical intellectuals and what he deeply believed to be right, Shari'ati could only share his reflections and dilemmas with the silent yet receptive pieces of blank paper that surrounded him. Personified by a pensive and melancholic young Tunisian accused of past political activities, Shari'ati told his own story: the story of a man who was silenced because of what he considered to be the political excesses of infantile leftism.

Shari'ati's popularity as an orator and the expectations of his followers added to his woes. He knew they wanted him to lead them in their political quest. But he did not believe, at this stage, in drawing them into a political whirlpool from which a safe exit was, he knew, impossible. Invoking the futility of political struggle under prevailing circumstances, he found himself in the predicament of all those revolutionaries who believed that long-lasting transformations could not be achieved overnight. He sounded like the legal Marxists during the Russian revolution, or the old guard of the second National Front who abandoned political activism and chose to wait for the appropriate hour.

His heart, however, told him that he should return to his 'pigeons' which awaited him with their 'innocent eyes'. Returning to them, however, meant political engagement and all the problems that it invited. He wrote: 'Anyway, aside from these pigeons, what else does this man have under the blue sky?'⁷² Could Shari'ati find a way to maintain the interest and enthusiasm of his young disciples, the interaction with whom constituted his only social *raison d'être*, without pushing them into what he believed to be the abyss of revolutionary activities? Was his nature incompatible with 'breaking eggs to cook an omelette'? Or was he yet not convinced that the eggs had been laid or that the time was right to break them? Did he see himself as the messenger of the recipe and not the cook? Whatever the case, the tightrope on which he was trying to walk was formidable, arduous and joyless. To the 'young revolutionary generation', which accused him of not being politically active enough, he honestly declared, 'I am a man who writes and talks and that is all.'⁷³ As much as he wanted to prepare revolutionary conditions, his predicament was that his words spawned passion, conjured revolutionary zeal and provoked action. Caught between reason and passion, Shari'ati wrote:

I have always been righteous, my pen has always been an honest servant of either my heart or my head and save these two, it has never served another master. If there has been a betrayal, I have betrayed myself, no one else has been the victim. My head has fallen victim to my heart and how hard I tried to avoid this.⁷⁴

Shari'ati's embroilment with SAVAK gradually dragged him away but did not cut him off from his exhausting and perfect world of gnosticism which was the reason behind his pensive and melancholic mood. An unpleasant and persevering reality began to haunt him, absorbing his attention and consuming his concentration. Referring to the period after SAVAK's first inquiries about Shari'ati's public speeches and the conditional ban on them, he wrote, 'I have fallen prey to the hunter, his arrow pursues me, they want to kill me, they want to skin me, they will pluck my eyes, they will cook my meat, tear me up and eat me.'⁷⁵ Irrespective of Shari'ati's rather exaggerated predictions about his fate, it is clear that he deeply sensed the danger and was preparing himself for what might have been in store for him.

Referring to his own plight, Shari'ati described a city, every inch of which was occupied by 'high walls' through the holes in which one could only see the 'flickering lights of the spears of the caliph's Cossacks' and where only the 'pitiless sound of their boots' could be heard. In the city he depicted, there was not a house nor a room or a corner where one could find refuge from 'the watchful eyes of the usurpatory government's detectives'. For the past 2000 years, Shari'ati wrote, 'the usurpation of government, the despotism of the Caliphite and their oppression has become evident and public.' However, he added 'the *jihad* for freedom and liberation has commenced and the taste of independence, deliverance, free elections, freedom to elect a leader according to the will of the people, the right to vote, and the freedom to speak and write has found its way into their hearts.'⁷⁶

Probably after one of his summons to Khorasan's SAVAK, he wrote, 'I thank you Lord, I have escaped once again, I have once again emerged clean, healthy, well and upright from the sewer. Oh! I have been bargaining for four months employing all existing languages.'⁷⁷ His rejoicing after his escape was probably premature. Soon, complications with Tehran's SAVAK over his lectures again disrupted his life. As he put it, 'the walls were rapidly closing in on me from every side.'⁷⁸ In an understandably frustrated and desperate mood he explained that he had no hope of breathing free air and tasting freedom again. Denied the ability to write and publicize his ideas, he asked 'What else can I do? I can smoke, I can dream, I can be sensitive, I can endure and that is all.'⁷⁹

Shari'ati's six months of forced silence, regular interrogations and systematic surveillance of his acts and words wore him down: 'They have blindfolded me,' he wrote, 'placed locks on my lips, tied my hands from behind around a tree, put shackles on my ankles and set guards to watch on me.'⁸⁰ He often spoke of being physically sick and running a high fever. It was not easy to manoeuvre one's way out of the grasping claws of the security services. Shari'ati's success at getting his

way through sophistry, tautologies, appeasement, dupes and bluffs became more and more difficult as he was confronted with more cunning and astute inquisitors. For how long could he tell his interrogators that what he was preaching was for the good of the country while informers reported that even his ordinary lectures at Mashhad University, perhaps in spite his intentions, created a volatile political atmosphere? Shari'ati's attempt at convincing SAVAK of the political neutrality of his lectures and his 'good intentions' was wearing thin. The game of cat and mouse tired him out. Being constantly on guard not to say the wrong thing or to make the wrong gesture was becoming unbearable. He wrote, 'I am tired, wounded, weak and I can no longer bear to fight.'⁸¹

Weary of the pressure on him and the unceasing haggling with the security forces, Shari'ati spoke to himself: 'I am the only one who cannot talk! I have forgiven everything, I have disregarded all, I will even promise my allegiance (*bay'at mikonam*) and all I want is to talk and they won't let me.'⁸² He referred to the lingering feelings of fear, suffocation and yearning that reminded him of his pitiful existence during these years.⁸³ Frustrated with his inability to speak and drained by the ever-mounting pressure, Shari'ati even thought of suicide. He wrote, 'How effortless and easy it is to die! All it needs is a simple decision.'⁸⁴ If he were single, he said, he would have accepted death's invitation, yet his responsibility towards his family, especially his children, dissuaded him from doing so. According to Shari'ati, at this time his marriage was also under great pressure and his wife was chiding him for his inability to look after and provide a comfortable life for the family.⁸⁵

Around 10 September 1969, at the depth of his hour of despair, and probably before his 'interview' with Sabeti in Tehran, Shari'ati wrote an important memorandum which throws light on the crucial political issue that at the time preoccupied him. Reflecting on Mosaddeq and his era, he praised the man and his efforts, but commented, 'we witnessed his destiny, and we saw that his faith, love, sincerity and concerns did not yield anything but pain, distress and "three wasted" years of these people's life and this generation.'⁸⁶ In a rhetorical fashion, as if he was trying to provoke himself and prepare for his important 'interview' in Tehran, he questioned the extent to which Mosaddeq's actions were of service to Iran:

Had this patriotic old man predicted 28 Mordad, would he have not served his country more by retiring silently to a corner in Ahmabad, sitting, living alone and dying, without this generation ever knowing him and becoming fond of his words, thoughts, feelings and even sorrows. What am I saying? Would he have not reduced the misery of this afflicted nation?⁸⁷

As though convinced of the validity of his own argument, Shari'ati went as far as saying that Mosaddeq, who was a politician and knew the world around him, should have 'kept quiet' even if for him to keep quiet was more difficult than dying.⁸⁸ Painfully, Shari'ati questioned his own heritage as a Mosaddeqist and a political activist. Without referring to Allahyar Saleh's famous thesis of 1963, which

had become known as the 'policy of patience and yearning' (*siyasat-e sabr va entezar*), Shari'ati presented the same kind of argument. He was no stranger to the political debate over reform or revolution and recalled how he had defended the cause of revolution against his father's defence of reform.⁸⁹ During this period, however, he had become partially convinced of the durability and long-term benefits of reform.

Feeling as if his mood and this type of analysis would be very much appreciated by his inquisitors, Shari'ati suddenly pricked himself out of what might have been a conviction or a delusion. He abruptly assailed his own idealism and lashed out at his deeply-felt gnosticism. Exorcising himself and casting India in the role of Iran, he wrote, 'Gnosticism will dispirit and weaken India even more. She should look for a Mao of her own.'⁹⁰ Taking the argument a step further, he concluded that his country needed a realist, neither Mosaddeq's tears nor Shari'ati's book of poems were of any use to it. It needed a liberating revolutionary such as Mao Zhe Dong.⁹¹ Within his own mind he counteracted his resignation with a surge of revolutionary activism, thus regaining his inner peace and balance.

Delighted with his victory over the security forces, after which he was once again allowed to lecture at different universities, Shari'ati's mood changed considerably. Suddenly his writing became challenging and provocative. Proud of the acclamation and praise that he was receiving for his speeches he reminded himself that he no longer cared for such commendations:

In those days, I was young and in search of fame, I was strong and epic-like, I was a man in the style of the *Shahnameh*, in the style of the men of Khorasan! At present I am a wounded old man, ill, weak, and in search of anonymity and now I am a *ghazal*-like person, in the style of Shams-e Tabrizi's book, the Indian style.⁹²

As much as he tried to attenuate his joy in his writing, it exuded fulfillment.

Part of Shari'ati's gaiety was due to an important implicit understanding which he had deliberately chosen to ignore. He knew that he was allowed to resume his lectures only on the condition that he would prove his 'good intentions' towards the regime. This meant that SAVAK expected him to at least include certain laudable comments about the reforms and policies of the regime. In a defiant, yet elated passage, Shari'ati explained how he had lectured at Shiraz's Pahlavi University, where he had been highly praised by the students, without having observed the normal routine of asking permission to be begin his lecture, addressing the distinguished personalities in the audience, mentioning the shah's name, or praising the regime or anything that had to do with it.⁹³ Shari'ati basked in the glory of his sting. He ridiculed his hosts and, referring to himself in the third person he wrote:

They spent so much on inviting him and the reception for him, they paid him two thousand tomans to come and speak for an hour, yet he did not allude to anything nor thanked anyone, he talked about everything but did not even make the slightest reference to the country's current progress, and the White Revolution.⁹⁴

During this period, Shari'ati's moments of joy and exhilaration were few. Under surveillance, he took refuge in his solitude and occupied himself with his books and writing. Back from an interrogation session in Tehran, a gloomy Shari'ati is said to have lighted another cigarette with the one he had just finished and confided in his colleague Reza Qanadan that, 'Until now, I thought that the administrators of this regime were a bunch of idiots and the thought filled me with joy, but this time that I was summoned, I realized that I was wrong.' He added that in the past, when someone 'interviewed' him he had easily been able to convince them that he was not a danger to the government and that his lectures were in the country's interest. At the end, he would make some promises and the interrogators would agree to leave him alone. During his last 'interview' in Tehran, as he began to lecture as usual, repeating his old lines, he was interrupted by his interrogator and asked if peace was undesirable, to which Shari'ati had responded, 'certainly not'. His interrogator had agreed, but added that he knew what kind of objectives were pursued 'under the pretext of *khaneh-e solh*'⁹⁵ (the centre for peace) and that Shari'ati's discourse was analogous to that of *khaneh-e solh*. He had then asked Shari'ati to answer his questions directly without beating around the bush. After this interview, he realized that his interrogator could not be easily fooled.⁹⁶ Qanadan recalls that Shari'ati's employment at the University of Mashhad was terminated only a few months after this dialogue.

Hosseiniyeh Ershad

'A building at first'

The idea of an unconventional religious institution which would appeal to a different audience than that frequenting the traditional mosques was by no means new. Mohammad-Taqi Shari'ati's Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truths in Mashhad was the pioneer of this type of establishment. Later, in 1960, Ahmad Alibaba'i had organized a series of congregations at his home during the month of mourning, Safar. At these gatherings, the traditional ritual of grieving over the martyrdom of Imam Hossein gave way to a different arrangement. The professional tear-jerking *rowzkehani* was replaced by lectures on the social, political and economic aspects of religion and its relevance to modern life. The speaker was not perched on a pulpit surrounded by a public seated cross-legged on the floor. Instead, he stood behind a table or lectern addressing an audience seated on chairs. Following the precedent of the Mashhad Centre, the lecturers at Alibaba'i's meetings were not traditional religious types, but Islamic modernists seeking to actualize religion. The public was also very different. Instead of the mosque-going zealots with their unquestioning faith in their formalistic religion, the participants at the Centre and at Alibaba'i's gatherings were mainly politicized intellectuals and students raised in religious families yet striving for viable this-worldly arguments from which they might construct an intellectual defence of their faith. The two key lecturers in what later became known as 'The Monthly Talks Society for Displaying the Correct Path of Religion', were Morteza Motahhari and Mahmud Taleqani. The Monthly Talks Society was also financially supported by a few wealthy bazaari philanthropists such as Ja'far Kharrazi and Mohammad Homayun.

In April 1963 the inhabitants of Qoba street, located in the predominantly well-to-do Northern part of Tehran, saw construction workers digging the foundations of what at the time was thought to be a mosque. Within a few months, a large area had been enclosed and a spacious tent erected a few hundred meters away from the construction site. While Bazargan, Taleqani, Sahabi (father and son) and Alibaba'i were on trial for their political activities and the regime thought that by imprisoning them it could weed out their ideas, their friends and followers were working to open another front. In the late autumn of 1963 Ershad began its religious-cultural activities in makeshift quarters. The news of Ershad's activities reached

Bazargan, Sahabi and Alibaba'i, who were serving their sentences in Borazjan prison. In a letter from Haj Sadreddin, Alibaba'i was informed that in the footsteps of his efforts, a Hosseiniyeh modeled on the Monthly Talks Society was being found by Mr Homayun, his friends and with the cooperation of Mr Motahhari.¹ At this time, Ershad had not yet legally registered itself as a religio-educational charity organization. Initially, Mohammad Homayun had put up some 24 million rials for the purchase of 4,000 square meters of land in the Chaleharz area on which a 1,000 square meter structure was to be built. While Homayun, the pious merchant and philanthropist, who had been encouraged by the momentum and positive impact of the Monthly Talks Society remained the financial magnate behind the project, the conception and idea of Ershad, the direction and shape of which underwent considerable change over time, belonged to others.

Nasser Minachi Moqadam, a friend of Bazargan's and a man closely associated with the Iran Freedom Movement played a key role in the conceptualization and materialization of Ershad. Minachi, a shrewd lawyer and an astute manager with solid links to the bazaar, drafted and finalized Ershad's statute and internal by-laws which defined it as an educational and research charity organization devoted to scientific and religious inquiry. Minachi recalled that, 'in the legal spirit of Haj Hossein Aqa Malek's endowment in Khorasan, which was drawn up in such a way that even Reza Shah could not expropriate it, I tried to draft a legal structure for Ershad which would block any encroachments by the state, individuals or organizations.'² As the driving administrative force behind Ershad, Minachi dealt with the endless everyday problems that occurred through different stages of its evolution. His task, however, was facilitated by the fact that he had the full and unswerving trust of Homayun; even though he had also financially contributed to the organization's capital fund, his share was small as compared to that of Homayun.

Morteza Motahhari, a very well educated cleric, was one of the main instigators if not architects of the Ershad project. At the time, Motahhari belonged to a group of progressive clerics (which included Abolfazi Musavi Zanjani, Mahmud Taleqani, Mohammad-Taqi Ja'fari and Mohammad Beheshti) who had combined forces with well educated Islamic lay intellectuals, intent on freeing Islam from the ossified and formalistic fetters that had been forced upon it by the conservative clerical custodians of the faith. Through his active participation in the Monthly Talks Society and the dialogue that preceded the publication of 'A Discussion on Religious Leadership and the Clerical Institution', Motahhari and his friends had drawn a clear distinction between their own modernist view of Islam and that of the traditional conservative clerics who argued that Islamic precepts were eternally valid and tampering with them, sacrilegious.³ This reformist group later became the target of vindictive attacks by the hidebound clergy.⁴

While Motahhari's input into developing the idea of Ershad as a centre from which a modernist Islamic discourse could be propagated is apparent, the extent to which he actively participated in setting the institution in motion is questionable.

Motahhari was an intellectual cleric who wished to produce and organize scholarly academic research and lectures in an already finished and well-functioning establishment. He was not the type to dirty his hands and shoes in the mud, closely supervising the construction of the Hosseiniyeh, or to run from one government office to another resolving its endless everyday legal and administrative problems. He wanted Ershad to become another al-Azhar and himself to be its rector.

The First Phase

The period between autumn of 1963, when the activities of Ershad started under a tent, and the Winter of 1967, when its building was finished and it was legally registered as a charitable organization, could be considered as its first phase. According to Ershad's articles of association, registered on 14 January 1968, its three founding members were Mohammad Homayun, Abdol-Hossein Aliabadi and Nasser Minachi Moqaddam.⁵ The organization was administered by a three-member Board of Directors (*hey'at-e modireh*), elected on 17 December 1966, over a year before its official registration, for a period of four years. The statute of Ershad, clearly stipulated that members of the Board of Directors were chosen by the founders.⁶ Homayun was president of the Board; Motahhari, vice-president; Minachi, treasurer; Seyyed Ali Shahcheraghi and Mohammad Taqi Ja'fari were alternate members on the board.⁷ Furthermore, the fact that according to Ershad's statute all financial obligations, cheques and promisory notes had to bear the signature of both Homayun as the president and Minachi as the treasurer, indicated that real power was in their hands. Aliabadi's name among the founding members of the organization gave it considerable prestige and legitimacy since Aliabadi was a reputable jurist, a professor of law at Tehran University and a one-time chief prosecutor of Tehran. Having lent his name to the organization, however, Aliabadi avoided getting involved in its everyday affairs.

Legally, the clerical partners of Ershad had honorary and insignificant decision-making positions and the fact that the founding members did not include any clerics permanently tilted the scales of power in favour of the non-clerics. Motahhari's position as vice-president was eye-catching, yet it had no real weight. According to Minachi, at the time of drafting the statute, Motahhari accepted this position on the Board of Directors and did not press to become a founding member because he knew that he had not done anything substantial to deserve it.⁸ Administratively, however, Motahhari was responsible for selecting and inviting speakers as well as for publications. Shahcheraghi, who was an alternate member of the Board, was also appointed as *imam-e jama'at* or the cleric who led the prayers at Ershad. Ja'fari, the second alternate member, was not given any official position and remained a consultant. Prepared for an eventual disagreement among the members of the Board, Ershad's statute stipulated that in such circumstances, the decision of the president of the founding committee would determine the

outcome.⁹ This clause enabled Homayun to become the final arbiter in the disagreements that surfaced later.

The purpose of Ershad, according to its statute, was to build a mosque and a lecture hall for the propagation of Islamic principles and objectives. Among its other stated aims were the founding of Islamic research and educational centres, the provision of health services, the undertaking of economic activities to ensure the survival and continued operation of the institution, the publication of religious books, newspapers and magazines, the establishment of charitable activities and finally aiding other educational and Islamic institutions.¹⁰ In Ershad's statute it is clearly and categorically stated that the institution would not interfere in political matters.¹¹

The name Hosseiniyeh Ershad encapsulated the dual if not contradictory character of the institution. The term Hosseiniyeh echoed a concern for old religious rituals and practices, while ershad, or guidance, implied an enlightened rupture with the past. A *hosseiniyeh* is simply a religious location where Shi'ites congregate to mourn the martyrdom of Imam Hossein and his family. In this sense, the name of the institution was similar to the hundreds of *hosseiniyehs* spread all over Iran. It served to indicate that Ershad intended to become a popular religious place. However, whereas believers in traditional Hosseiniyehs re-lived the past and soothed themselves by shedding tears over a thirteen-century old event without any reflection or thought, Ershad was to guide the believers back to the source of their faith, interpret its historical evolution and explain its meaning and role in the modern world. Hosseiniyeh Ershad was to be the intellectual torch which would lead believers out of their obscurantism to a modern, applicable and liberating Islam.

Soon letters were sent out to both clerics and lay speakers inviting them to lecture at Ershad. Mohammad-Taqi Shari'ati was among the first to receive such a letter. At this time, Ali Shari'ati, who had just returned from Paris with his family, lived at his father's home in Mashhad. The Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truths in Mashhad had suspended its activities and Mohammad-Taqi had been in retirement since November of 1962. According to Mohammad-Taqi, initially some thought had been given to calling the new institution the Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truths, but the idea was dropped because of the political connotations of association with the Centre. He recalled that in a letter, Motahhari informed him of a new religious institution in Tehran which was to operate on the same model as that of the Centre.¹² Together with the Board of Directors, Motahhari officially invited Mohammad-Taqi to deliver a series of lectures at Ershad over a ten-day period.¹³ Accepting the invitation, Mohammad-Taqi started his lectures in the winter of 1964. Motahhari later recalled that at the time Mohammad-Taqi was retired and lived off a 1,000 toman a month pension so the invitation was also a means of helping him financially.¹⁴ Mohammad-Taqi's collaboration with Hosseiniyeh Ershad, however, turned out to be more than temporary. After a few months, he moved to Tehran, where he initially lived with his youngest daughter,

Batul and his sister and where he later took a new wife, Khadijeh Ma'sumi.¹⁵ He lectured at Ershad for some four years, and became an influential figure there. In the mourning month of Moharram 1385, which coincided with September 1965, twenty consecutive evening lectures were organized at Ershad. One of the main speakers was Mohammad-Taqi who discoursed on the topic of the caliphate and the institution of imamate. Later, Motahhari referred to this lectures series as the real beginning of Ershad's activities.¹⁶

The Second Phase

Ershad's new phase, which began in 1967, was marked by three important events. First, its 1,000-square meter main building was finally finished. The Board of Directors planned its official inauguration with a series of ceremonies and lectures by distinguished clerical and non-clerical figures in the holy month of Ramadan which coincided with December 1967. Also commemorating the beginning of the fifteenth century of Mohammad's Prophethood, Motahhari decided to engage Ershad in the publication of a series of scholarly articles on the Prophet. The inauguration ceremonies and lectures have been described as 'unprecedented and magnificent'.¹⁷ Their star was Fakhreddin Hejazi, whose fiery style of preaching and passionate lectures attracted a great deal of attention.

By the autumn of 1967, Ali Shari'ati, who had been teaching at Mashhad University for a year and had been invited to deliver lectures at a few universities around Iran including Tehran's Melli University, was gaining a reputation as an Islamic modernist whose lectures were very well received by the young. After Mohammad-Taqi moved from Mashhad, Ali would visit his father at Ershad whenever he was in Tehran. Motahhari, who had known Ali before he left for Paris, was impressed by the young Western-educated Islamist. The two had also engaged in discussions and exchanged opinions on various topics. Shari'ati recalled their discussion of the design on the front cover of Motahhari's book, *Ensan va sarnevesht* (Man and Destiny). Motahhari had at first found it too abstract, but he had taken a liking to it once Shari'ati had explained that it expressed the ambiguity which was the essence of destiny.¹⁸

Motahhari later invited Shari'ati to contribute an article to a book he planned to edit and that Ershad was to finance. In a flattering letter, dated 22 October 1967, he explained his project to Ali.¹⁹ The proposed book was to include a number of articles on the Prophet. The three most important covered the Prophets' life, from birth to prophethood, from prophethood to *hejira*, and from the *hejira* to his death. The first two parts were to be written by Seyyed Ja'far Shahidi, a well-established Islamic scholar. Shari'ati was invited to write the article on the life of the Prophet from *hejira* to death. Motahhari's gracious proposal at the time was in the tradition of scholars promoting a rising talent.

The topic was not at all alien to Shari'ati who had covered it exhaustively in his lectures at Mashhad University during the academic year of 1966-67. The chronological part of the article Shari'ati subsequently wrote in response to this invitation was essentially an abridged version of these lectures. The first part was an innovative attempt on Shari'ati's part to present a modern and worldly definition of *hejira* and the Prophet's historical act. In addition, however, Shari'ati sent Motahhari a second unsolicited article called the 'Profile of Mohammad'. This article was a complete reproduction of the last section of one of his lecture courses from which he had deleted a two-page section on Buddhism, Confucianism and Manichaeism.

The poetic style, graceful flow and novel message of both articles greatly impressed Motahhari. It was, however, the second which truly moved him. According to Seyyed Ali Khamen'i, Motahhari enjoyed the 'Profile of Mohammad' so much that he re-read it three times.²⁰ The novelty of Shari'ati's work as compared to his contemporaries was the ease with which he moved across different religions and concepts, reinterpreting traditional concepts and synthesizing what he believed to be correct. He did not confine himself to the unimaginative wooden tongue of his colleagues. In a domain long dominated by traditionalists, Shari'ati's words and his approach were fresh and even his clerical readers appreciated the change. Reflecting his gnostic mood at the time, in the closing paragraph of his article, Shari'ati described the task of authentic intellectuals as that of 'founding the civilization of Europe in India and infusing the material body of Europe with Indian gnosticism, taking the soul of the East to the West and bringing the reality of the West to the East.' He supported his plea for a reciprocal relation between the East and the West by condemning the unilateral relation that had hitherto existed and concluded by reproducing his favourite statement by Fanon which rejected the blind imitation of everything European and called for the creation of a 'new idea', a 'new race' and a 'new human being'.²¹

Shari'ati had authorized Motahhari to edit his articles.²² But Motahhari was so thrilled with them that he published both in their entirety. In his article on the life of Mohammad from Prophethood to the *hejira*, Shari'ati experimented with his concept of the 'degrees of significance of words'. He was redefining and enlivening a dead term, *hejira*. From a traditionalist's point of view, this modernist and unprecedented reinterpretation of *hejira* was a *bid'at* or unacceptable innovation which contradicted the *sunnat* and even bordered on heresy. At this time, Motahhari was neither offended by Shari'ati's methodology nor the innovative and even revisionist content of his articles. He did not oppose his class analysis of religions or his characterization of the prophets of Abrahamic religions as representatives and defenders of the cause of the oppressed. He did not even amend Shari'ati's account of how the Prophet had tacitly approved Abu Bakr's role as the leader of public prayers just before his death.²³ On the contrary it seems as though at this time the small group of modernist and politicized clergy appreciated Shari'ati's introduction of radical sociological and political ideas and methods into the analysis of Islam. Later, however, Motahhari gradually took issue with both the content

and methodology of Shari'ati's analysis.

The first volume of the book, *Mohammad, The Last of Prophets*, appeared in September of 1968. In the meantime, Motahhari, elated by his discovery of Ali Shari'ati's talent, asked him to speak at Ershad in a series of lectures organized to mark the 15th century of Mohammad's Prophethood, for which the book was prepared. Shari'ati thus delivered his first talk at Hosseiniyeh Ershad on the evening of 25 October 1968 and his topic was 'Nasl-e now-e Mosalman' or 'The new Islamic generation'.²⁴ This was the beginning of a fruitful yet tumultuous relationship between Shari'ati and Hosseiniyeh Ershad. It is important to realize that Shari'ati entered into an Ershad which was already strife-ridden and that a series of rivalries, completely unrelated to Shari'ati, would reach a boiling point less than three months after his first lecture.

The Hejazi Affair

Just as Shari'ati was being welcomed into Ershad with open arms, the star of another fiery non-clerical speaker, who had made considerable waves there, was rapidly fading. Fakhreddin Hejazi, who was from Khorasan, had begun his collaboration with Ershad in 1966 on Motahhari's invitation and by 1967 was a regular speaker.²⁵ Soon his inflammatory and rhetorical style became popular, especially among the youth, attracting larger and larger crowds. In 1967, Hejazi was invited to speak on ten consecutive nights during Ramazan when a lecture he delivered on Abu Taleb was so moving and emotional that Motahhari was brought to tears.²⁶ Hejazi's programmes were so successful that he was also invited to participate in the *haj* ceremonies that were organized by Ershad.

Hejazi's increasing popularity at Ershad gradually made him a target of criticism. The traditional clergy looked upon him as a dangerous rival whose oratory was stealing their audience and undermining their authority and influence. The members of a Mashhadi lobby group referred to Hejazi's pro-regime articles, accused him of personal impropriety and contested his political credentials, questioning his relationship with Astan-e Qods-e Razavi, the powerful government organization which administered all receipts from Imam Reza's endowments in Khorasan.²⁷ As pressure was brought to bear on Motahhari to terminate Hejazi's collaboration with Ershad, he too began to question the role of his former protégée and finally came to the decision that he must go. Minachi, however, was against Hejazi's expulsion. Ershad's Board of Directors was thus faced with its first crisis, one which pitted Motahhari the cleric against Minachi, the layman, for the effective control of Ershad.

While Motahhari was seeking to put an end to Hejazi's presence at Ershad, Hejazi had submitted an article entitled 'The World-view of the Prophet' for the volume that Motahhari was editing. With the exception of Motahhari, all members of the board which reviewed the articles for publication, voted in favour of

Hejazi's article.²⁸ Motahhari, however, took a firm stand and declared that if the article was to be published he would terminate his cooperation with Ershad. Under substantial pressure from Motahhari and against their better judgement, the members of the review board rejected Hejazi's article.

Feeling certain that, with the presence and influence of his own hand-picked Consultative Board – Navid, Haj Baba, Zomorodian, Haj Tarkhani and Haj Ahmadi – he would be able to obtain his more important demands, Motahhari combined his anti-Hejazi campaign with a much broader attack on Minachi. On 17 January 1969, he wrote a letter to Homayun, the president of Ershad's Board announcing his resignation and adding: 'please consider my resignation as irreversible'.²⁹ Homayun refused to accept the resignation and immediately informed Motahhari of his decision. Two days after the first categorical letter, Motahhari agreed to attend the meetings of the Board of Directors and the Consultative Board.³⁰ Furthermore he outlined the reasons for his resignation and put forward the conditions for its retraction.

Motahhari's grievances centred around the person of Minachi who he accused of being a deceitful sensationalist who had monopolized all decision making powers,³¹ of belittling those who Motahhari had invited to speak at Ershad and of steering Ershad towards closer ties with government institutions. In another copy of his resignation, Motahhari referred to another and probably the real reason for his discontent with the course of events at Ershad. 'The first time that I realized *Minachi's* ill intentions,' he wrote 'was in his draft of the statute [of Ershad] which was founded on one leg.'³² Clearly Motahhari was referring to the fact that the clergy, specifically himself, were not included among the founding members. Presenting the conditions for the retraction of his resignation, Motahhari demanded an end to the interference and meddling of *Minachi* and his 'gang' in the 'propaganda', 'research' and 'administrative' units of Ershad; the revocation of Mr ... membership and the irrevocable expulsion of *Hejazi* from Hosseiniyeh Ershad.³³ Motahhari further demanded full control of the propaganda and research unit for four years and the uncontested right to choose and employ all his colleagues. He also demanded that the administrative unit should coordinate itself with his programmes.³⁴

Homayun, who trusted Minachi and considered his active presence as necessary for the efficient running of Ershad, did not concede to Motahhari's sweeping demands. At the same time, he did not want Motahhari to leave Ershad because it was his reputation that had attracted modernist clerical and non-clerical speakers. Since the Hejazi affair had brought everything to a head, Hejazi himself had to be sacrificed. Motahhari's grievances in terms of the internal management of Ershad were relegated to the re-drafting of the internal by-laws and his purviews in the propaganda and research units, over which he was effectively given management, were substantially enhanced. These concessions temporarily diffused the crisis. Motahhari's campaign, however, did not succeed in dislodging Minachi from his position of power and the feeling of distrust between these two powerful adversaries

continued to simmer under the surface.

With the departure of Hejazi and the help of his enhanced personal power base, Motahhari sought the active participation of his clerical colleagues. He wanted to prove to Homayun that his management of the speakers, would make Ershad a highly reputable and popular Islamic centre.

Shari'ati's First Taste of Ershad

From his very first lecture at Ershad on 25 October 1968, Ali Shari'ati's appearance and performance made an impact. Ali Davani, a clerical speaker at the Hosseiniyeh, recalled that Shari'ati's first lecture attracted far bigger crowds than his or Motahhari's.³⁵ Aware of the effect of Shari'ati's 'superb oratory and verbal skills', Motahhari recognised that he was needed to win over and attract the youth.³⁶ At the same time, Motahhari had to appease his clerical colleagues who demanded respect and social status yet had lost their edge to modernist non-clerical preachers. This attempt to appease the two irreconcilable sides proved difficult if not impossible and while Motahhari's heart was probably with the modernist non-clerics, his garb and natural habitat belonged to the clerics.

After his first lectures at Ershad, Shari'ati wrote a revealing letter to Abdol-Ali Bazargan, Mehdi Bazargan's son, expressing his astonishment at the fact that 'against his own will and against all odds' he had become a preacher at a hosseiniyeh.³⁷ He participated, Shari'ati wrote, because he firmly believed in Motahhari and could not refuse his request. Shari'ati informed Abdol-Ali Bazargan that even though he had been invited to return to Ershad during Ramazan (10–15 December 1968) he had hesitated until he read the announcement publicizing the lectures at Hosseiniyeh Ershad in the daily Kayhan. He was furious at the order in which the speakers were arranged in the printed announcement. Once again he found himself caught in petty rivalries and jealousies similar to those he had experienced in student politics during his stay in Paris. This time, however, it was clerical politics. Ershad's announcement specified that Motahhari would speak on the topic of 'Divine Justice' (*adl-e elahi*) from 8 in the evening. It added that Shari'ati and Katira'i would also speak, after which Shahcheraghi would lead the prayers.³⁸ Shari'ati had been given the impression that he would be the main speaker during one of the five nights between 19 and 24 Ramazan, and had discovered, to his surprise, that he was announced as an adjunct speaker. He was not, in other words, deemed significant enough to be the main speaker and his function was simply to 'warm up' the crowd. Believing that he was intentionally dropped from the list of main speakers, he accused the clergy of narrow mindedness: 'I am not of their type, neither would the asses who are their disciples allow me to ride them, nor am I the type who wishes to ride asses. I was their guest on whose presence they had insisted a thousand times.'³⁹

Shari'ati confided his dilemma to Abdol-Ali Bazargan as a means of getting

something off his chest. Even though he felt insulted by Ershad's announcement, he did not want to categorically turn down their invitation because to do so might have seemed disrespectful towards Motahhari. In addition, he believed that participating in Ershad was the correct course of action, and that he was thus obliged to swallow his pride. In his letter, Shari'ati also thanked Abdol-Ali Bazargan for his letter to him. In that letter, Bazargan had informed Shari'ati that his lecture on 'Existentialism' at Melli University in Tehran which Abdol-Ali Bazargan had organized was a success and the students had very much appreciated it. Thrilled with the news, he wrote, 'it is evident that my lectures are understood and appreciated by university students. Those who go to traditional religious gatherings (*takiyyeh*) are not my customers. I feel more distant from them than from enlightened atheists.'⁴⁰ Even though the letter gave no clear indication of his plans, Ali Shari'ati finally decided to turn down Ershad's invitation. One day after the first announcement in Kayhan, Ershad announced that Hassan Rohani and Katira'i would be Motahhari's adjunct speakers and there was no further mention of Shari'ati.⁴¹ The daily *Ettela'at*, published the news under the title of 'a small change in programme at Ershad'.⁴²

On 7 February 1969, less than two months after Shari'ati had declined the invitation to lecture at Ershad, Mehdi Bazargan wrote to him asking him to give a talk at the Islamic Association of Engineers.⁴³ Bazargan intended to revive the activities of this association – a political front functioning under the pretext of religious activities – which he had founded but which had become dormant during his imprisonment. In his letter, he suggested that Shari'ati should talk on *bey'at* or compliance and acceptance. The text of Bazargan's letter has not been made public, but through Shari'ati's response to it one can guess its content. Bazargan had clearly praised Shari'ati and, alluding to the letter that Shari'ati had written to his son Abdol-Ali, chided him for his refusal of Ershad's second invitation, which, he seems to have suggested, was somehow rooted in 'expediency' and a sense of 'self-preservation'.

Shari'ati received Mehdi Bazargan's letter on 18 February 1969 and replied immediately.⁴⁴ Thanking him for his kind words he tried to exonerate himself of what he believed to be Bazargan's criticisms. He argued that he had never allowed his own interests to intervene with his beliefs and ideals. He complained that he was offended by the 'vice' of 'expediency and self-preservation' attributed to him. Yet he reiterated his feeling that the announcement in Kayhan was an insult to which he believed to be a ploy on the part of the clergy, especially 'Falsafi's gang', to humiliate him and Katira'i, another layman. The real reason for his absence at Ershad during Ramazan was, he maintained, the simple fact that he had fallen sick.

On the issue of his talk at the Islamic Association of Engineers, Shari'ati openly enquired whether he would be able to present novel ideas, explanations and interpretations on the issue of *bey'at*, in which case he would readily accept. However, he added that if he was to be confined to what he called the unacceptable Shi'i framework of analysis based on the rejection of *ijma'* or consensus, he would not

be able to lecture because he did not believe in it. 'My view on the matter,' he wrote, is neither Shi'i nor Sunni, it is either both or neither'.⁴⁵

Acknowledging his deep respect for Bazargan, Shari'ati humbly added that as his true teacher, in the spiritual and religious sense of the word, Bazargan could always make any unilateral decision on his behalf and Shari'ati would willingly obey.⁴⁶ Once assured by Bazargan that he could present his own interpretations, Shari'ati kept his promise and lectured on 'Bey'at va Vesayyat (Democracy va Rahbariye Enqelabi)' or 'Democracy and Revolutionary Leadership' at the Islamic Association of Engineers in Tehran. Complying with Bazargan's instruction and in an attempt to appease Motahhari, who had tried to convince him that the announcement in Kayhan was an inadvertent mix-up, Shari'ati returned to Ershad. His second series of lectures began on 6 March 1969. In his talk, 'Ali a mythical reality', Shari'ati mentioned that he had been 'ordered to speak at Ershad for two nights'.⁴⁷ When, on the last day of March 1969, Shari'ati returned to Ershad for four consecutive nights, the content of his lecture had a distinctly different tone and emphasis. His long lecture, 'Ummat va emmam dar jame'shenasi (The Islamic community and religious leadership from a socio'logical perspective), which continued through all four sessions, was the first of his many politically-charged speeches delivered from this platform.

In 'The Islamic community and religious leadership', Shari'ati embarked on his long journey of providing a dynamic, radical and highly politicized reinterpretation and redefinition of classical Islamic concepts. In a socio-political environment characterized by silence, fear and self-censorship among the politically conscious, his public discourse was an act of intransigence. He invited his audience, which was packed into the main lecture-hall of Ershad, to participate in his grand Islamic project. 'Islam,' he told them in his distinctive voice, was both 'an ideology and a social revolution which intended to construct a classless and free society on the basis of equality and justice and in which would live enlightened, responsible and free people'.⁴⁸ His ideas and terminology aroused and caught the attention of the youth among his audience, who had never before heard such concepts from a presumably religious preacher. As if speaking in a political democracy, Shari'ati openly discussed the most suitable political form of preparing and cultivating a 'revolutionary society' in which citizens steeped in revolutionary ideology would experience political and intellectual maturity. During this revolutionary transitional period, Shari'ati argued, society had to be governed by a political system of 'guided democracy' or *démocratie dirigée*. This concept is a euphemism for a benevolent dictatorship. The mission of this 'guided democracy', was to construct an ideal society 'as it ought to be'. It was to transform the 'institutions, social relations, culture, ethic, outlook, tastes, wants and values of society on the basis of a "revolutionary doctrine" and a "reformist ideology"'.⁴⁹ On the issue of who was to lead the 'guided democracy', Shari'ati argued that it had to be an ideal type, a perfect human being and the maximum and uncontested leader. The Islamic term for such a person, he argued, was imam.⁵⁰ To be an imam, 'is an innate right

which is the consequence of the imam himself ... whether he is elected or not, appointed or not, he will be the Imam, since he has all the virtues of being an imam. It is immaterial if he becomes the choice of all members of society or that of only a few'.⁵¹ The leader of the Islamic community during the period of 'guided democracy', is neither in need of the people's consent, nor is he, as a result, responsible to them. He is guided by the vision of a perfect society and equipped with a maximum programme based on a revolutionary Islamic ideology.

Echoing the condescending view of representative democracy which prevailed among revolutionaries in the 1960s, Shari'ati argued that as long as the masses in underdeveloped and poor countries remained 'ignorant, slave-like and decadent' an enlightened revolutionary leadership was necessary to effect the transformation of society's old modes of thought and its defunct ways.⁵² Representative democracy, he argued, would be counter-revolutionary and incapable of promoting the revolutionary changes that were required to free these countries and their people from the vicious circle of underdevelopment and poverty. In a democracy, ignorant and reactionary masses would vote for conservative and reactionary leaders and policies. Seeking international justification for his position, he referred to the Bandung Conference of the non-aligned nations in 1955 and the questioning of the merits of representative democracy at it. From a practical point of view, Shari'ati argued that a dictatorship was a political system which would not change its ways by anyone's promptings. Therefore, he concluded that it would only change by force.⁵³ Using a Leninist rationale against political democracy, he argued that the classes who endured the real burden of oppression and exploitation did not have the patience for free elections and a pluralist democracy, which were the objective of affluent liberal intellectuals.⁵⁴ Shari'ati's theoretical analysis, similar to that of most other revolutionaries of his time, was not a purely anti-democratic position. He argued that a democracy, in which people would vote and thereby take their destiny in their own hands, would become the desirable political system once society reached a certain level of political awareness and consciousness.⁵⁵ The particulars of when and how the revolutionary transitional stage gives way to the democratic phase were not discussed.

Shari'ati's 'The Islamic community and religious leadership' can be considered as one of his most revolutionary lectures in which he clearly outlined the necessity of confronting dictatorship with force. From another perspective it was an attempt by Shari'ati to explain his previous controversial position on the democratic character of Abu Bakr's election as the first caliph. In his article published in *Mohammad, the Last of the Prophets*, Shari'ati's reference to the election as an example of Western democracy and proof of the fact that it had rendered the people independent of the Prophet's intervention in their political life, had raised many objections from clerical quarters. By stressing the concepts of *showra*, or council, and *ijma'*, or consensus, as democratic institutions and customs in Islam, Shari'ati had undermined the Shi'i concept of *vasayat* or succession, on the basis of which Shi'ites considered Ali to be the first rightful caliph. Shari'ati's two stage political

system for underdeveloped countries, provided him with an outlet through which he could redeem himself from the 'mistake' of having eulogized democratic elections, which had denied Ali his claim to become the first caliph. Shari'ati argued that during the transitional revolutionary period, which he considered to have started after the death of the Prophet, society should have been governed on the basis of a 'guided democracy' and ruled by an imam who had to be a perfect human being and an ideal role model. Only the Prophet knew who that man was, which is why he had proclaimed Ali as his successor. So Shari'ati concluded that *vesayat* or succession was the just philosophy of a specific transitional and revolutionary period.⁵⁶ Had the companions of the Prophet accepted Ali, according to the will of the Prophet, as their first caliph, after a few generations, society would have been prepared for democracy based on *showra* or councils. Claiming both succession and democracy to be equally Islamic, Shari'ati reconciled and modified his previous statements. He argued that democracy was an ideal and desirable system of government but if it were practised at the wrong historical period it would prove disastrous as was the case of Abu Bakr's election, leading to the rejection of the real revolutionary leader, Ali. The two-stage model, reinterpreted and adapted to the history of Islam should have satisfied both the Shi'i clergy and the revolutionary left. The clergy saw in it the vindication of their theory of *vesayat*, whereas the revolutionary left viewed it as a justification of their theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat or the labouring classes. It was not surprising that the speech became very popular. Shari'ati delivered seven lectures between the months of March and May. After his seventh lecture 'Motemadden va motejaded' (Civilized and modern) on 9 May 1968, he was forced to be absent from Ershad for nearly seven months.

Just as Shari'ati was delivering his speech 'Civilized and Modern' to his huge audience at Ershad, Bahrami, the head of Mashhad's SAVAK, was writing a report on him to the central office of SAVAK in Tehran. The report was dispatched on 10 May 1968, and in it Bahrami indicated that Shari'ati's 'good intentions' had not yet been proven.⁵⁷ In response a memo signed by Moqadam prohibited Shari'ati from accepting any more invitations to lecture outside the University of Mashhad pending further investigations.⁵⁸ He was informed of this decision on his arrival from Tehran, when he was summoned to Mashhad's SAVAK for an interview with Bahrami.⁵⁹ One of the main charges against his speeches at the time was that they were becoming too popular and attracting very large audiences. In the statement Shari'ati had to write for SAVAK clarifying and explaining his position, he complained that it had been the increasing popularity and not the content of his lectures that had been construed as anti-governmental.⁶⁰ SAVAK, however, was not quite so naive; it was becoming sensitive both to the popularity and the content of Shari'ati's speeches and needed to be convinced that their long-run benefits would compensate for any short-run damage. Naturally Shari'ati's pre-scheduled lectures at the University of Tehran and Ershad were subsequently cancelled. It was not until 7 October 1969 and after a long period of haggling and negotiations that

Mashhad's SAVAK was informed by Moqadam that 'under surveillance' Shari'ati could resume his guest lectures.⁶¹ After this conditional clearance, Shari'ati informed Ershad that he was once again allowed to give public lectures. To an official inquiry from Hosseiniyeh Ershad about Ali Shari'ati's status, SAVAK responded in a memo dated 9 November 1969 announcing that it was not opposed to Shari'ati lecturing at Ershad.⁶²

After the publication of *Mohammad the Last of the Prophets*, Shari'ati's articles, especially 'From hejira to death' created considerable commotion among the traditional clergy. The first voices of criticism against certain passages, among them those of Seyyeds Morteza Jazayeri and Lankarani, were raised only a few months after the publication of the volume, in September 1968. Soon a slanderous five-page pamphlet called 'Ershad's letter of Introduction', said to have been written, duplicated and distributed by Seyyed Sadreddin Jazayeri and his son, Seyyed Morteza, was circulated.⁶³ The pamphlet attacked the founders, the speakers and the institution of Ershad in a general manner, yet Shari'ati's assertions were singled out and assailed specifically. The major bone of contention between Shari'ati and his vociferous adversaries centred around the former's revisionist presentation of certain historical and religious incidents. From an ardent Shi'i perspective the questioning or reinterpretation of certain key Shi'i concepts or account of events was tantamount to apostasy. Such key issues were usually related to cases of dispute between Shi'is and Sunnis that dated back to the time of the Prophet and his successors. The pamphlet singled out four examples of what it considered to be Shari'ati's outrageous assertions. It argued that such contentions were only aimed at 'the annihilation and destruction' of Islam.

It lashed out, first of all, at Shari'ati's account of the Prophet's reaction, just before his death, to the congregational prayers led by Abu Bakr. According to the sources used by Shari'ati, the Prophet was satisfied and content at the sight of Abu Bakr leading the prayers. This account outraged zealous Shi'ites since it seemed to imply that the Prophet's satisfaction with Abu Bakr as the leader of the public prayers was an affirmation of his legitimacy as the first caliph. Secondly, the pamphlet referred to a passage in which Shari'ati gave a positive picture of both Abu Bakr and Omar. Shari'ati characterized Abu Bakr as 'one of the most influential figures among the people' and 'a very close friend of Mohammad'. Omar was described as 'a man of principles, inflexible in the application of justice'.⁶⁴ The traditional clergy considered such accounts as too favourable to individuals who in popular Shi'i culture were considered as unjust usurpers of Ali's position and therefore the most despised enemies of Shi'is. Third, Shari'ati's reference to the election of the caliphs as an example of Western democracy and proof of the fact that it rendered the people independent of the Prophet's intervention in their political life, seemed as a vindication of the elections on Shari'ati's part. Once again, the traditional clergy believed that Ali was appointed by the Prophet to succeed him and that the elections were a ruse to deny him his rightful position. Finally, the pamphlet referred to a passage in which Shari'ati had listed the nobility in

Mohammad's entourage who could succeed the Prophet. The list started with Abu Bakr and ended with Ali.⁶⁵ From the ordering of the names, the authors concluded that in the eyes of Shari'ati, Abu Bakr's status and position was uppermost while Ali's was last.⁶⁶ The pamphlet asserted that the real problem with Hosseiniyeh Ershad was not that it 'propagated Wahabbi and Sunni ideas,' 'attacked the principles of Shi'ism' or 'propagated certain corrupt practices such as playing music and encouraging the free mingling of opposite sexes', but that it 'promoted all kinds of irreligiousness'.⁶⁷ Hosseiniyeh Ershad was dubbed as 'Yazidiyeh-e Ezlal' by its antagonists – a term said to have been coined by Seyyed Morteza Jazayeri. Yazidiyeh, which rhymed with Hosseiniyeh, meant the abode of Yazid the murderer of Hossein. Ezlal, which somehow rhymed with Ershad meant evil and wrongdoing. From the point of view of its clerical enemies, Hosseiniyeh Ershad was not a Shi'ite centre for the guidance of the people but an irreligious base which propagated evil and anti-Shi'ism. Very soon it became evident that the traditional clergy would not tolerate any intellectual reinterpretation of what they believed to be the eternal teachings of the Shi'i faith as they had learnt it through generations.

Motahhari's reaction to such clerical invectives and criticism, which soon found their echo among the traditionalists in the bazaar was firm. Among his inner circle, he defended Shari'ati's assertions. On the most sensitive and controversial issue of Abu Bakr's leading of prayers, before the Prophet's death, Motahhari sincerely and passionately defended Shari'ati's writings in the presence of friends.⁶⁸ In response to messages that bordered on threats in terms of issuing a *fatwa* against Ershad, Motahhari tried to convince his conservative clerical colleagues that the situation was under control. When Aqa Mirza Abol-Hassan Rafi'i sent word that things that were being said about Ershad might oblige him to take a religious stand, Motahhari responded that he too had studied philosophy and *fiqh* or the science of religion and that he was being very vigilant.⁶⁹

In the face of mounting anti-Ershad and anti-Shari'ati propaganda, Motahhari set out to counter the rumours and charges of Wahabbism and Sunnism. He wrote an introduction to the second volume of 'Mohammad, the last of the Prophets', which was partly a rebuttal to Shari'ati's critics, in which he made certain 'necessary and useful' observations.⁷⁰ The introduction, however, was to be signed by Hosseiniyeh Ershad and not Motahhari, and so the Board of Directors had to make the final decision on its content. On 13 July 1969, two months after Shari'ati had been barred from public lecturing, the members of the board decided that it would be more suitable for an explanatory introduction to appear in the second printing of the first volume of 'Mohammad the last of the Prophets', but that it would be more appropriate for Shari'ati himself to clarify the issues and provide counter arguments to the criticisms.

The day after this decision was taken, Motahhari wrote a kind letter to Mohammad-Taqi Shari'ati explaining the course of events in detail and referring to those who had criticized Ali Shari'ati's article as 'simpletons and malicious' characters who had made a 'lot of noise'.⁷¹ To quell the opposition, Motahhari requested

Ali Shari'ati to write a few explanatory words on the controversial issues raised by his opponents and in case he concurred with Motahhari's comments he suggested that Shari'ati could refer to or touch on some of the points he had raised.⁷² In conclusion, Motahhari added that the final decision belonged to Shari'ati and that if something was to be written it had to be short and fast so that it could be prepared in time for publication.

Motahhari's prompting came right in the middle of Shari'ati's long bouts of depression and his tug of war with SAVAK. Already dejected by the ban on his public speaking, he was also having to come to terms with the flood of criticism from the clergy. The impassioned criticism of what he had thought was a highly laudable account of Mohammad surprised and hurt him. Feeling the walls closing in on him from all sides, he was utterly forlorn. He realized that he had become the prey both of the Iranian security services defending the political status quo, and the clergy safeguarding the existing religious order. He felt like an unwanted foreigner in his own country with no one to turn to but himself. In this introverted mood he shut out everything that would exert emotional pressure on him. His reaction was a long and heavy silence, similar to the one imposed on him by the state. Shari'ati turned off his receptors to all possible outside signals. He could, and did, play deaf, dumb and mute to all those whom he did not wish to be addressed by and in relation to all those subjects he did not wish to talk about. In Motahhari's case it was not the person whom he disliked but the issue which had come to involve them. Instead of defending himself against allegations that he knew were unfounded, he took a vow of silence. The more he was urged to explain, clarify, justify and even retract his controversial assertions the less he showed any sign of compliance. His reaction was construed as arrogant stonewalling by his detractors.

In a letter to Hossein Razmjū, his old classmate at the University of Mashhad, Shari'ati explained his state of mind and his anxieties. Razmjū who had greatly appreciated Shari'ati's *Eslamshenasi*, had written to him on 10 April 1968 describing it as one of the most beautifully written and distinguished studies in Islamology and the history of religions, a most eminent and unique human epic.⁷³ After the wave of denunciations, Razmjū's letter was a pleasant surprise and a breath of fresh air. Confiding in him, Shari'ati lamented the times in which he lived. Alluding to the clergy, he wrote, 'goodwill and receptiveness towards novel ideas by newcomers' is a rarity while 'malice, envy, misapprehension and the desire to contradict, villify, humiliate and incriminate abounds'.⁷⁴

Shari'ati acknowledged that his ears were so full of criticisms and invectives that had he not been so callous he would have become disheartened and abandoned his objectives. Characterizing the environment which he lived in as a 'dark, frightful and dangerous night', Shari'ati conceded that he expected no one to listen to what he said nor read what he wrote, let alone respond appreciatively. He maintained that his wailing and ululation was an uncontrollable jet of molten lava that erupted from inside him.⁷⁵ Mocking the traditional clergy, he wrote, 'this

community is neither in need of my words nor even in need of Ali's or even God's, for they have their [own works of reference] *Bahar al-Anwar* and *Kahl al-Basa*.⁷⁶ After thanking Razmju for his very kind words, Shari'ati summed up his existential problem at the time and wrote, 'loneliness in the midst of the masses and feeling like a stranger in one's own country are truly injurious pains.'⁷⁷

Shari'ati's resistance to modify his controversial views let alone retracting them eventually became an important source of disagreement between he and Motahhari. While for Motahhari a disclaimer or a few words of modification would have disarmed Ershad's and Shari'ati's critics and calmed down the rage of the clergy, for Shari'ati any modification of his views was construed as engaging in *taqiyyeh* or dissimulation, a habit for which he always criticized the traditional clergy. As a reformer, Shari'ati could neither agree with the positions of the traditional clergy nor comply with their demands to join in their chorus. As Shari'ati's invitation to tolerance and dialogue instead of war or conformity fell on deaf ears, the traditional clergy heightened their criticism. It was not until December 1969 that Shari'ati was once again allowed to resume his lectures at Ershad.

The Return to Ershad

After seven months of forced absence, on 2 December 1969, Shari'ati started his new lecture series at Ershad with a speech on Imam Ali. His topic during the three consecutive nights that he spoke at Ershad was not incidental. Shari'ati was responding to his clerical critics who presented him as an anti-Ali Wahhabi. In his lecture, 'Ali is alone', Shari'ati explained that Shi'i Muslims adored Ali without really knowing him or his true human qualities. Ali's solitude, Shari'ati argued, was the result of his preoccupation with his Beloved and the spiritual distance between him and the ordinary people. Ali was alone because he was a stranger among his own people. Shari'ati argued that the more one reaches the stage of spiritual perfection, the lonelier one comes to feel.⁷⁸ The similarity between Shari'ati's account of Imam Ali's solitude in his lecture at Ershad and his own solitude as reflected in his letter to Razmju leads one to believe that the title of his lecture, 'Ali is alone', was a direct reference to Imam Ali and also an indirect reference to another Ali, whose authentic following of Imam Ali, he implied, had led him to the same predicament.

Shari'ati lectured at Ershad four more times during the month of December. His first lecture, which lasted two nights was originally entitled, 'Ali insan-e tamam' or 'Ali the complete human being'. Throughout his two lectures, Shari'ati got so carried away with defining what he meant by a complete human being that he was forced to end his speech without having made the connection with Ali. His second lecture, 'Mohajerat va tamadan' or 'Migration and civilization' was essentially an elaboration of the significance of the concept of migration that he had already

between Shari'ati's speeches after his first ban by SAVAK and his highly politicized lectures on 'The Islamic community and religious leadership' before the ban, was the absence of direct political references to concepts such as revolution, revolutionary movement, revolutionary leadership, revolutionary ideology and a revolutionary party.

It was during December 1969 that Ershad invited Shari'ati to accompany its group to the *haj*. The invitation meant that Ershad would accept all the financial responsibilities of Shari'ati's trip. It is said that aside from fulfilling an important religious obligation, the group sent by Ershad also pursued certain political objectives. According to Minachi, the Students' Association of Europe and America had insisted on Ali's trip to Mecca. The representatives of the Students' Association wished to confer with Shari'ati over their relations with the liberation movements in general and the Palestinian organizations in particular.⁷⁹ The problem with sending Shari'ati on the trip was that subsequent to his problems with SAVAK, a ban had been issued by Mashhad's SAVAK on Shari'ati leaving Khorasan's legal jurisdiction. It is said that had it not been for the mediation of Haj Mahmud Manian, who was an influential businessman and a National Front sympathizer, Shari'ati would not have been given permission to go to the *haj*.⁸⁰ Shari'ati was also obliged to obtain permission from the University of Mashhad for his absence during the winter term. According to Matini, dean of the Faculty of Literature at the time, government employees were allowed a single leave of absence for the *haj*.⁸¹ The university officials, therefore, did not oppose his request for a leave of absence and on 9 February 1970, Shari'ati along with Motahhari, Minachi and Seyyed Golamreza Sa'idi accompanied the Ershad group to Mecca. According to Minachi, during their trip, they met with Palestinian representatives and a group of Iranian students from Germany, with whom they discussed political issues. On 19 March 1970, after an absence of three months from Hosseiniyeh Ershad, for a good part of which he was in Mecca, Shari'ati lectured on 'Mey'ad ba Ebrahim' or 'Meeting Abraham' during four consecutive nights.

Even though Shari'ati announced that the subject of his lectures was going to be on 'his observations about the *haj*', he spent the first night explaining the real meaning and significance of Abraham's act of smashing the idols. To understand Islam, Shari'ati argued, one has to understand Abraham's 'religious movement'.⁸² Abraham's anti-idolatrous movement, Shari'ati argued, was not a movement against the multiplicity of idols and statues in Mecca, but was in reality the first historical movement against a class, race and status-differentiated society. The multiplicity of statues was the symbolic expression of a class-ridden and discriminatory society. Each statue or idol was the expression of one class, race, or social status. Idolatry, Shari'ati announced, was the religious and philosophical justification of such discriminatory and unjust societies. The 'deceitful custodians of religion' who have historically justified and rationalized the stratified and unjust status quo, Shari'ati proclaimed were the true 'idolaters'.⁸³ At the beginning of his speech, Shari'ati pro-

primitive communal society. Having explained the role of coercion and force in the process of primitive appropriation of surplus, Shari'ati argued that the economic system based on private property and exploitation could not have been maintained without convincing both the exploiters and the exploited that the system was either a 'natural' or 'God-ordained' order. The task of rendering the unjust status quo as a natural state of affairs, according to Shari'ati, was left to philosophers and men of religion, who took advantage of the pure religious sympathies of the people.⁸⁴

On the second night of his lecture, Shari'ati declared that 'a religion of idol-worshipping and polytheism' was thus created by those who were dependent on the ruling and monied classes to vindicate the exploitative, unjust and discriminatory economic system which had come into existence after specialization and the division of labour.⁸⁵ The sociological significance of Abraham's movement, Shari'ati declared, was its war against class discrimination and its attempt to create a classless society, which was the true objective of a monotheistic religion. Shari'ati, thus reinterpreted polytheism as a socio-economic system based on class exploitation and monotheism as a socio-economic system based on a classless society. Shari'ati posited that Abraham's love and awareness allowed him to rebel against historical determinism. The absence of objective conditions, Shari'ati argued, did not discharge Abraham from his individual human responsibility, which was to stand up and combat 'racial and class discrimination'.⁸⁶ Abraham's movement was thus categorized as an everlastingly relevant cause and the *haj* as an exercise which reminded Muslims of their liberating socio-religious responsibility.

On the last day of his lecture, Shari'ati shared the secret of his wording with his audience. As if certain that no one outside the intimate circle of the initiated would be present on the second night of New Year, Shari'ati exposed his symbolic manner of speech. 'Here I have no choice but to employ commonly used words and expressions, yet these everyday words do not have the same "plain and everyday meaning" in my indirect diction'.⁸⁷ Shari'ati informed his audience that they would have to reinterpret his words and look for the hidden meaning of his expressions to understand his symbolic and coded messages. He said, 'I will use the words in one story to tell you a different story'.⁸⁸ Referring to Imam Hossein's decision to interrupt the rites of the *haj* ceremony to wage *jihad* against Yazid, Shari'ati declared that performing religious rites and rituals was only meaningful in a society which was oriented towards the right direction.⁸⁹ Shari'ati implied that in a society such as Iran where polytheistic values prevailed, performing religious rites was futile and all ceremonies were best interrupted for waging *jihad* against the polytheistic status quo.

He summed up his *haj* experience in terms of three principles. First, 'linking-up' with one's cultural and religious past by visiting its source and identifying with the objectives of the ever-continuous Abrahamic movement. Second, 'congregating' as independent individuals, ordinary people and not the chosen ones. Finally 'migrating' with the purpose of 'establishing equality and justice on earth'.⁹⁰

Migration, Shari'ati maintained, necessitated rising from one's corner of the world and reaching the house of God or moving from one's intellectual position towards the divinely ordained one. Alluding to social uprising and insurrection as the final stage of the Abrahamic movement, Shari'ati said, here, the word rising (*pa shodan*) has also a 'parallel meaning'.⁹¹

The last three nights of Shari'ati's lecture on 'Meeting Abraham', happened to fall on the night of the Iranian New Year (1349) and subsequently its first and second nights. On such nights Iranian families usually celebrate the New Year by visiting immediate family and very close friends. The occasion is a private one, celebrated among close family and friends. Traditionally on such nights one does not attend a public event be it cultural, artistic or sportive. Yet during the nights of Shari'ati's speech, Hosseiniyeh Ershad witnessed a breach of traditional customs as the multitudes of young men and women crowded into Ershad's main lecture hall that could hold up to 1,700 people. Surprised at the bulging audience, Shari'ati thanked them for coming to Ershad in spite of the 'strong and colourful alternative attractions'.⁹²

The pitch and content of Shari'ati's speech was once again militant and contentious. It seemed as if Shari'ati had quickly forgotten the seven months ban on his public speaking and the grief and pain that it had caused him. As if inspired by his own description of Abraham's single-handed and bold rebellion against all polytheistic elements, Shari'ati escalated his tone not only against the unjustifiable and exploiting economic system based on private property but also against the clergy. He pointed a very accusing finger at them as apologists of the wrongful status quo and *inter alia*, the shah's regime. Lashing out at common Shi'ite opinions, formed and upheld by the clergy, Shari'ati derided those who believed in 'tombs, golden sepulchres and gold-plated domes' and poked fun at 'statue-lovers' and 'those who mourned and wept for those whom they did not even know'.⁹³

As the targets of Shari'ati's magnetic speeches became clearer, his criticisms sharper and his conclusions more impassioned, his popularity increased by leaps and bounds. Ershad, as Shari'ati's base in Tehran, also gained in fame. An apparently bashful and softspoken young man who seemed easily manageable and readily brought back into ranks by a few reproachful words of high religious dignitaries, proved to be an unyielding, individualistic and charismatic speaker who sought no one's official support and survived on the ever-increasing admiration and adulation of his young audience. Following his righteous, solitary yet socially conscious and responsible role-models – Abraham, Ali and Abu Zarr – Ali Shari'ati took it upon himself to preach from Ershad what he believed to be the 'Truth'.

Ershad

'Now a faith and a movement'

For both Shari'ati and Hosseiniyeh Ershad 1349, the Iranian year that ran from 21 March 1970 to 21 March 1971 was tumultuous. In the face of Shari'ati's growing popularity, Ershad's Board of Directors invited him to deliver more lectures. By this time, however, Motahhari's circle had effectively gained control of the institution's 'propaganda' activities. Apart from Motahhari himself – who spoke a minimum of four, and sometimes up to eight nights a month – most of the Ershad lectures were delivered by his close clerical friends, men like Nasser Makarem-Shirazi, Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Mohammad Beheshti who had just returned from a period of study in Germany. While it is true that some of the younger members of Motahhari's group tried to use a more contemporary language in their exposition of Islamic ideas, their lectures did not have the same appeal as those of Shari'ati.

Although Motahhari had been prompting him since the summer of 1969, Shari'ati had still made no attempt to respond to his clerical detractors. Just as he had turned a blind eye to the suggestions of well-wishers that he should respond to, and calm down the polemical wrangling that his lectures at the University of Mashhad and his book, *Eslamshenasi* had caused, Shari'ati, in his usual manner, listened carefully to the counsel he was offered, but continued to ignore the issue. His writings and speeches after the appearance of his two articles in *Mohammad the Last of the Prophets* had further infuriated the clergy and added to already existing tensions. Gradually, Motahhari's friends joined the anti-Shari'ati chorus with Mohammad-Taqi Falsafi – a fiery clerical preacher who, in spite of his enigmatic political positions, was highly respected by the mainstream clergy – taking issue with some of Shari'ati's controversial Islamic interpretations and denouncing him from the pulpit.¹

Shari'ati's intransigence over both his religious positions and his politicized lectures had two simultaneous consequences which paved the way for an ultimate showdown within Ershad. For the young people who flocked to his lectures, his words symbolized the battle-cry of justice against the representatives of the 'evil' status quo. Among the up-and-coming intelligentsia, who felt crushed by the fearful

weight of the political atmosphere of their country, Shari'ati's poignant words fell on receptive ears. His defiant ideas and intransigent voice were gradually becoming an indispensable source of intellectual nourishment and he was rapidly acquiring the status of a hero. But the very same characteristics that endeared him to the younger generation alienated the pragmatic speakers at Ershad as well as those members of the clergy who felt as though they were becoming the target of his attacks.

On the surface, the relationship between Shari'ati, Ershad and Motahhari appeared smooth and cordial during the Iranian year of 1349. During the first six months of the year Shari'ati lectured seven times. One of these lectures – 'Eqbal the reformer of this century' – was part of a series commemorating Allameh Mohammad Eqbal Lahuri. The last, on 'The history of philosophy in Islam', was delivered on 23 August 1970. After this Shari'ati did not speak again at Ershad until 9 April 1971 – the first month of the Iranian year 1950. His relatively long absence was due to an internal political struggle within Ershad's Board of Directors. Trouble was already brewing in the early months of 1970 and it reached a climax in the autumn over Shari'ati's increasingly militant lectures.

A Disturbing Iconoclast

Shari'ati's lecture on 'Eqbal, the reformer of this century' was a watershed in the development of his thought. Since his return to Iran he had been deeply influenced by gnosticism, and this lecture reconciled two seemingly contradictory tendencies and currents both within himself and in Islam. He was attracted to and had consistently oscillated between politics which implied an active social life, and gnosticism which required the abandonment of people. Now he declared that true Islam was a synthesis of both. It was in this period that he replaced the classical Sufi concept of self-annihilation and subsequent assimilation or living in God with self-annihilation and subsequent assimilation or living in the people. The path from gnosticism to political activism, a path along which Shari'ati treks backwards and forwards more than once in his life, is once again traversed.

Through Eqbal, Shari'ati came to realize that Islam was not a 'one dimensional' religion – neither purely political nor purely gnostic. It was concerned both with the affairs of the Hereafter and those of this world. 'Islamic culture', Shari'ati declared, was not only 'spiritual, ethical and metaphysical', but also 'social, political, ethical and responsibility-generating'.² The greatest and most revolutionary contribution of Islam to human history was that it channelled the

... power of religious love and the miraculous force of gnostic feelings, which had always existed within individuals, guided them towards revolution, sacrifice, the welcoming of death and martyrdom and towards the attainment of power to create a human society based on justice and dedicated to material and spiritual progress in this world.³

Shari'ati thus singled out the main responsibility of Islam as a worldly one. True Islam, he maintained, was an un mutilated multidimensional synthesis, the 20th-century representative of which was Eqbal. In Eqbal, the Western-educated Muslim philosopher, mystical poet, lover of Mowlavi, political militant, anti-colonialist, Islamic revolutionary and reformer, Shari'ati saw his own image. As if talking to himself and reproaching himself for his state of mind since his return to Iran in 1964, Shari'ati told his mesmerized audience, that Eqbal was not a one-dimensional person and had never allowed his love for Mowlavi to become an obsession with gnosticism.⁴ Rejoicing in his moment of clarity, he declared that actually-existing Islam was nothing but a 'dismembered' and 'disintegrated' religion, isolated and imprisoned within narrow un-Islamic and metamorphosed ideas.⁵ This opiate-like religion, which had killed Islamic society in the name of Islam and had kept the people in a state of resignation, bondage and religious degradation, Shari'ati concluded, was in need of a 'renaissance' through 'ideological struggle'.⁶

Shari'ati's ideological struggle was intended against the Islam of 'inert' and 'reactionary' *ulema*, or the learned men of Islamic jurisprudence. With these custodians and proponents of Islam gathered in the *howzehha-ye elmiyeh*, or traditional seminary schools, Shari'ati declared, 'one cannot struggle against colonialism and resist the onslaught of colonial culture, Western philosophy and civilization.'⁷ Repeating the notion that Islam does not possess an institutionalized clerical organization (*rowhaniyat*), he nevertheless acknowledged that the clergy had not signed any concessionary treaties with imperialistic powers.⁸ Yet he did not envisage an active or meaningful role for them in the ideological struggle he proposed. For the first time from the pulpit of Ershad, Shari'ati lashed out against his clerical detractors, accusing them of being 'incapable of comprehending his arguments and even inept at reading his writings'.⁹ In a condescending, yet non-hostile tone, he told his Westernized intellectual opponents not to confuse Iran's social reality with their wishful thinking. Since 'our intellectuals are against religion,' he observed, 'they think that society is also against religion.'¹⁰ He continued in a half-caustic vein: 'I as an intellectual should not forget that I do not live in twentieth century France or nineteenth century Germany but in Mashhad, Tehran or Esfahan.'¹¹ Shari'ati explained his mission as a responsible intellectual and concluded, 'our slumbering and reactionary society is now in need of reformers such as Eqbal and Seyyed Jamal Asadabadi.'¹²

Even though Motahari attended the lectures on Eqbal, the *velayati* clerics (those who considered themselves staunch supporters of Ali and his house) criticized the series. To them Eqbal was guilty of heresy (*zendigh*) and an enemy of the 'house of Ali'. He was also denounced for having directly insulted Imam Ja'far Sadeq in one of his poems. The organizers of the series were reprimanded for having praised a Sunni who had insulted the Imam.¹³ The wrath of the *velayati* clerics was essentially rooted in their opposition to any deviation from a traditional exposition of Islam, let alone a modernist interpretation in which the entire *raison d'être* of the

traditional clergy was questioned. Later, it was demonstrated that the alleged 'insulting poem', had nothing to do with Imam Ja'far Sadeq, but was a reference to two Indians by the name of Sadeq and Ja'far who were involved in contemporary Indian politics.¹⁴

Three months after he spoke on Eqbal, on 23 August 1970, Shari'ati returned to Ershad to deliver, over two nights, a scathing lecture, 'Religion against Religion'. In it he officially declared war on the traditional custodians of Shi'ism. Claiming that history had been the arena of continuous wars between religions, he made a distinction between two types of religions. One he called 'monotheistic', the religion championed by the prophets of the Abrahamic religions. The other was 'polytheistic', which in the name of upholding religion, had always challenged and struggled against the monotheistic religions. Shari'ati asserted that polytheistic religions often laid claim to the mantle of monotheistic religions, deceiving the people and delaying the triumph of monotheistic religions. He distinguished between false polytheistic and true monotheistic religions on the basis of the pivotal issue of their position in relation to the status quo. Polytheism was characterized as a creed that propagated acquiescence, while monotheism was defined as a revolutionary creed based on defiance.

Monotheistic religions, Shari'ati argued, had a spiritual aspect based on the belief in one God, and a material and worldly aspect representing human unity or oneness. Since human beings were the creatures of a single God, Shari'ati argued that they must be of the same kind and of equal value. From a sociological point of view, therefore, monotheism represented the belief in the unity of humanity, irrespective of race and class.¹⁵ Monotheism's invitation to obedience towards God, was also an invitation to rebellion against any authority or rule other than God. Monotheism was thus a 'revolutionary religion' which pressed upon its adherents to 'change and destroy whatever they found to be false and unacceptable.'¹⁶ Alluding to the unacceptable, Shari'ati called for 'the radical transformation of the existing state of affairs and its replacement with an order characterized by justice, equity and equality.'¹⁷

Historically polytheistic religions abused religion to justify an unjust status quo characterized by the poverty, destitution and subjugation of the many and the wealth and power of a few. Polytheistic religions represented the 'oppressors, enemies of progress, justice, truth, freedom, and civilization.'¹⁸ Shari'ati called the polytheists, hiding behind the mask of monotheism, dangerous deceivers of the people. Polytheistic religions, he claimed, had 'distorted all religious principles' to convince the people that their condition and fortune in life was the will of God and a function of their pre-determined fate.¹⁹ Concurring with Westernized intellectuals who called this religion, 'the opium of the masses' Shari'ati added that it was founded on ignorance, fear, discrimination and property relations characteristic of the feudal era.²⁰

Attacking the conservative clergy, Shari'ati exposed their hypocrisy according to his newly defined criteria. The traditional symbols of piety such as the practice

of Islamic rites and rituals and even the waging of *jihad*, he maintained, did not constitute necessary and sufficient criteria for regarding them as monotheistic. Accusing the *ulema* of following a polytheistic religion, Shari'ati declared war on the Shi'i religious establishment. Speaking about a different kind of Islam, he warned that 'his Islam' was not the one that had reigned during the past, on the contrary, it intended to destroy the polytheistic religion that had governed societies throughout history.²¹ The challenge of Shari'ati's provocative re-definition of monotheistic religions defied not just the authority of Shi'ite clergy but that of all religious establishments acquiescing with the status quo. Shari'ati ended his lectures by invoking the words of his symbol of monotheistic Islam, Abu Zarr, who had said, 'I am amazed at he who cannot find a morsel in his home and does not rebel against the people with his bare sword.'²² He rhetorically asked his audience why Abu Zarr spoke about rebelling against the people and answered provocatively, 'all people are directly responsible for my hunger.'²³

A week later, on 31 August 1970, Shari'ati lectured on 'The intellectual and his responsibility'. Having delivered one of his most incisive attacks against the clergy, he now tried to moderate and balance his discourse by attacking the advocates of modernism and secular enlightenment. Distinguishing between authentic and false intellectuals, he claimed that the findings, statements and positions of Western intellectuals, were rooted in the real problems of their own society and were thus authentic. Third World intellectuals, including Iranians, he claimed, were false duplicates who simply regurgitated the words of their Western models, whose problems were by no means similar to those of Third World citizens.²⁴ The Eastern intellectual, as a distorted image and echo of the Western intellectual, Shari'ati declared, was ignorant of his own socio-cultural environment and alien to his own people, their customs and traditions.²⁵ The authentic Third World intellectual was characterized by the ability to formulate novel ideas concerning a sense of the time and epoch, a knowledge of people, and an acceptance of responsibility.²⁶

The medicine that might cure the ills of Western societies was certainly not appropriate to the problems of the Third World. Shari'ati argued that whereas the Western intellectuals' struggle against 'clerical despotism' led to 'freedom of thought, intellectual blossoming, a brilliant civilization and unprecedented advances in science', the same act in Islamic societies led to the immediate removal of the only 'barrier that existed against the penetration of imperialism, economic exploitation and the onslaught of deviationist and corrupt ideas.'²⁷ It seemed as if against the attacks of Westernized intellectuals on 'clerical despotism', Shari'ati was closing ranks behind the clergy. As a Muslim, he allowed himself to criticize the clergy; unbelievers, however, did not have the same rights. Shari'ati lamented that in the name of the struggle against superstition, reaction and the worship of tradition assimilé intellectuals were destroying Iran's culture, spirituality and religion.²⁸ Shari'ati, the Muslim rebel, wished to assure the survival of Islam by uprooting what he believed to be the harmful and suffocating organisms that had come to live on it. Yet he would not allow 'outsiders' or secular intellectuals who confused

harmful growths with the healthy soul to threaten the entire corpus.

At the end of his lecture, Shari'ati alluded to an unidentified writer 'who says that we should not imitate the West, should stand on our own feet and should return to ourselves.' But even this 'person' is 'an imitation',²⁹ an assimilé who for the past seven or eight years had been playing with the idea of anti-Westoxication. He continued in an aggressive tone: 'you are ignorant about the West, Westoxication and the East, it is just since a couple of articles by Fanon and Cesaire have been translated and have become fashionable that you have come to learn about these concepts.'³⁰

Ten days later the reputable intellectual weekly *Ferdowsi* responded to Shari'ati's attack. In a short column it described his lecture, as a 'great deal of nonsense' and a 'concoction of strange and unique ideas'. Rather patronisingly it beseeched Shari'ati, 'not to deal with ideas which surpassed his intellectual capacity.'³¹ The journal conveniently assumed that Shari'ati had been talking about the late Jalal Al-e Ahmad. But this was not the case. On the contrary, his writings at the time of Al-e Ahmad's death almost a year earlier demonstrate the extent of Shari'ati's attachment to this famous writer. He had also consistently praised Al-e Ahmad as an authentic Iranian intellectual and included him in his list of 'pioneers of "the return to oneself" in the Third World' along with Fanon and Cesaire. At that time there were others in Iran who toyed with the ideas of Westoxication and authenticity. In particular, there was one vocal intellectual, working within the establishment, who regretted the fact that Iranians should 'beg from foreigners what they themselves possessed'. This person, whom Shari'ati disliked, was most probably the target of his attack. By aggrandizing the incident, *Ferdowsi* tried to reduce Shari'ati's attack on Westernized Iranian intellectuals, to a crude personal attack. *Ferdowsi*, an important bastion of modernist and secular intellectuals, did not enter into a debate or a dialogue with Shari'ati on his classification and definition of intellectuals, preferring instead to brush him aside as an insolent intellectual lightweight.

The Backlash

While the established intellectual community dismissed him as inconsequential, the clerical institution was becoming evermore sensitive to Shari'ati's attacks and insinuations. In the name of Islam, Shari'ati was openly attacking two main pillars of the Iranian society. His unveiled criticisms were aimed at the clergy as the guardians of a polytheistic, pacifying, reactionary and oppressive Islam. And he lashed out at the political, economic and cultural institutions and foundations of the shah's regime, calling for justice, freedom and equality attained through the institution of a revolutionary monotheistic Islam. His popular lectures were disquieting to those at *Ershad* who believed their role to be cultural and religious. Motahhari, for one, was deeply convinced that *Ershad*'s mission was to become a scholarly

institution similar to al-Azhar. He therefore believed that Ershad should avoid involvement in politics and fostering ties with students.³² The issue of Motahhari's continuing personal power struggle with Minachi also added to the tension which gradually came to reign over Ershad. The fact that Motahhari felt as though Minachi and Shari'ati were combining forces against him complicated the situation and led to a confusion of issues. Feeling that he was losing his domination over Ershad, Motahhari came to blame Minachi and Shari'ati, each for a different reason.

According to Davani, it was during 1970, probably in early spring, that he heard Motahhari complain about Shari'ati and the situation at Ershad. During a luncheon at his home in Qolhak, Motahhari referred to the considerable anti-Shari'ati and anti-Ershad sentiments that Shari'ati's articles and his book, *Eslamshenasi* had caused. Motahhari regretted that his attempts to calm the situation had proved futile and his recommendations to Shari'ati were ignored. As a result, control of the situation was slipping out of Motahhari's hands.³³ On the same day, Motahhari along with Hasheminejad and Davani visited Ayatollah Qomi, exiled in Karaj, in the hope of soliciting his mediation. Qomi knew both Mohammad-Taqi and Ali Shari'ati.

On their arrival, Motahhari who was both 'excited and distressed' explained the situation to the ayatollah. He exclaimed that he had tried very hard to bring Ershad under his own control so that it would not fall into unfriendly hands. Labelling Shari'ati as 'too much of an extremist', whose lectures and writings had provided his opponents with the best of pretexts, Motahhari expressed his anxiety over the disturbing rumours about Ershad and its consequences.³⁴ Elaborating on his major problem, Motahhari asserted that Shari'ati was uncontrollable, stubborn and impervious to council and recommendations.³⁵ The young people, he admitted, were more attracted to Shari'ati than the clerical speakers at Ershad. Fearful of losing him, Motahhari believed that Shari'ati's absence would cause problems. However, he underlined the fact that Shari'ati's continued involvement at Ershad had also antagonized the majority of the clergy. Caught between the two, Motahhari informed Qomi that if the situation did not change for the better, all their efforts at Ershad would prove counter-productive and backfire.³⁶ Seeking a way out of the deadlock, he pleaded with Qomi to talk to and advise both Shari'ati and the clergy. Given the situation, Motahhari also requested the ayatollah's judicious opinion on the extent of his own future involvement with Ershad. Qomi agreed to see and advise Shari'ati on the condition that he was prepared to come and visit him. He also advised Motahhari to speak with Shari'ati for one last time and if he refused to listen, Qomi suggested that Motahhari should continue at Ershad and Shari'ati be asked to leave. Raising doubts about Shari'ati's willingness to meet the ayatollah or even listen to him, Motahhari, however, placed the blame on certain friends of Shari'ati at Ershad who, he suggested opposed the presence of Motahhari and his collaborators at the Hosseiniyeh. Despite the existing pressing problems, Motahhari promised to do his best to resolve them, yet he told the ayatollah that if his attempts failed he would quit.³⁷

The account of another close friend of Motahhari's corroborates Davani's chronicle of some of the underlying causes of the dispute between Motahhari and the management of Ershad. According to Seyyed Ali Khamene'i, trouble between Motahhari and Minachi began in 1970. Minachi, who had been chosen as the managing director of Ershad, had effectively taken over all responsibilities including the selection of speakers and final decisions on publications. Motahhari had, thereby, been denied any real voice in the running of the Hosseiniyeh.³⁸ Khamene'i maintained that Motahhari's dissatisfaction stemmed from the belief that, while he had been one of the founders of Ershad which people associated with him and the clergy, he was not informed about 'who was to speak', 'what was to be said' or when the books planned by Ershad would be published.³⁹ As disagreements and quarrels escalated, Motahhari objected to and challenged the day to day operations at Ershad.⁴⁰ Khamene'i does not make any direct references to Shari'ati as the source of the disputes, as Davani does. Yet in his chronological account of events, he demonstrates that problems surfaced after Shari'ati's increasing presence at Ershad. The key issue of the selection of speakers and the content of the lectures is clearly a reference to Shari'ati's role. In the summer of 1970, according to Khamene'i, two lengthy meetings, each lasting for four to five hours, were convened in Mashhad in the presence of Motahhari, Khamene'i, Mohammad-Taqi and Ali Shari'ati. At these meetings the problems of Hosseiniyeh were discussed.⁴¹

From the accounts of those close to Motahhari and his own notes it is clear that Motahhari wished to see radical changes in the administrative and power structure of Ershad. As he had told Ayatollah Qomi, Motahhari sought to assure his own hegemony through the expansion of the three-man (excluding the alternates) Board of Directors to a five-man Board and the creation of a newly appointed Clerical Council.⁴² He also pressed hard to reduce Minachi's administrative powers to those of a financial manager, closely supervised by what he called an 'honest accountant'.⁴³ The attainment of these objectives would have meant the ousting of Minachi and the domination of Motahhari over the affairs of Ershad. The problems of 'who should speak' and 'what should be said', which related to Shari'ati, would have been automatically resolved once the Clerical Council came to yield absolute power.

The question of Shari'ati's eligibility as a speaker suddenly became a pivotal issue in the power struggle at Ershad. Motahhari seemed to have chosen the wrong terrain on which to wage his battle. What began as an attempt to purge Shari'ati and all individuals whose credentials were not approved by Motahhari's circle of clerical friends from Ershad's pulpit, backfired. The final outcome, however, had very little to do with Shari'ati's manoeuvrings. It was primarily Minachi, and ultimately Homayun who had called the shots.

The Struggle for Ershad

The attempt to muzzle Shari'ati began in the long deliberations of a series of meetings of the Board of Directors and a number of other 'friends' of Ershad. The group was composed of Abolfazl Zanjani, Motahhari, Beheshti, Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Bahonar, Musavi-Ardabili, Homayun, Manuchehr Salur and Minachi. The single item on the agenda was to look into the rumours about Ershad, analyse the condemnations against Shari'ati and prepare an official response to the antagonists of both Ershad and Shari'ati. Over five meetings, each lasting some two to three hours, the minutes of which have not been made public, discussion rapidly gravitated towards the establishment of proper criteria for speakers at Ershad.⁴⁴ The original purpose of the nine-man committee, drafting a formal rebuttal to the clerical opponents of Ershad and Shari'ati, was suddenly transformed into the establishment of 'proper' standards, for speakers at Ershad.

The idea of constituting a 'Board for the Establishment of Standards' (*hey'at-e ta'yin-e zavabet*), empowered to examine, approve and reject the credentials of speakers at Ershad is said to have come from Motahhari's friends. The board was to be composed of clerical associates of Motahhari, since it was argued that only the clergy were qualified to review the credentials of those who were going to speak at a religious institution. Such a move would have achieved two important objectives. First, anyone who was not to the liking of the clergy would have been excluded from Ershad. Second, control over the selection of speakers would have been wrested from Minachi.

The nine-man group composed of clerics and non-clerics, effectively came to perform the basic task of the Board for the Establishment of Standards, promulgating a set of standards for the speakers. The job of establishing the specifics was left to the clerical members of the committee. After deliberations, their final list included ten particular items related to the topics of Islamic education and training, practical loyalty of the individual and his immediate family to Islamic customs, physical appearance and personal conduct. Speakers were required to submit their lectures prior to public delivery to a 'Review Committee', that was to be established. Having drafted the standards of eligibility, the clerical members pressed for its immediate adoption and application.⁴⁵

Shari'ati's lack of formal religious training, the non-traditional religious content of his speeches and questions about his appearance as well as his and the immediate members of his family's practical loyalty to Islamic customs were the hurdles which would have immediately disqualified him as a speaker. Alarmed at the implication of ratifying the standards of eligibility, Homayun and Minachi gave their conditional approval but argued that if the 'standards' were to result in the exclusion of Shari'ati, they would strongly oppose them. The clerical members of the committee, on the other hand, pressed for their rigorous, uncompromising and universal application, which meant the effective ousting of Shari'ati. An acceptable compromise could not be found and, unwilling to alienate their clerical

colleagues, the two strong men of Ershad, Homayun and Minachi, who could have ultimately imposed their will, did not take any immediate measures. After having heard the standards and criteria, Homayun had jested that the clerical members of the committee should have also excluded bald people from speaking at Ershad!

Shari'ati's seven months absence from Ershad between 23 August 1970 and 9 April 1971, was the result of this deadlock; which seemed a victory for Motahhari. But Minachi all the while continued his attempts to return Shari'ati. On October 4, 1970, he wrote to the Chancellor of the University of Mashhad, informing him of Shari'ati's successful lectures at Ershad and formally requesting the university to allow Shari'ati to participate more regularly at Ershad's programmes.⁴⁶

Responding to what he had indirectly heard about the reasons for his forced absence and the developments at Ershad, Shari'ati wrote a caustic letter to Minachi and Homayun. Referring to the 'strict standards and criteria' adopted by the committee, Shari'ati quipped that the cards were stacked such that only the immaculate and the truly pious, namely the clergy, could guide the masses at Ershad.⁴⁷ Explaining his involvement with Ershad, Shari'ati wrote that after returning from Europe and sensing the changes in the social and intellectual conditions of the country, he realized that he could no longer pursue the 'constructive, quiet, profound and secretive type of work that he had always believed in'.⁴⁸ Confronted with two options, he could either lead an easy-going and trouble-free life by becoming a well-established academic at the university, or, he could 'shout every once in while reminding himself of the pains he felt'.⁴⁹ The first choice would have made him respectable to all, including what he labelled as 'the post-June 1967 Zionist Ayatollahs and *velayat*-loving mullahs'.⁵⁰ Even though on the heels of the second choice, which he made, followed all kinds of accusations and abuse from friends rather than enemies, Shari'ati claimed that he continued to speak at Ershad. Presenting two reasons for his perseverance, Shari'ati wrote that first, there was nothing else he could do and second, he wished to get an insight into the pre-occupations and reactions of the new generation.

In his letter, Shari'ati expressed his views on the decision of the Board to exclude him from speaking at Ershad. Shari'ati demanded a simple clarification; had he been eliminated from Ershad because of his conduct as a person or because of his thoughts. Claiming that he was quite content with not speaking at Ershad, Shari'ati immediately set out to demonstrate why the eligibility standards set by the committee could not be applied to him. He asserted that he should not be considered as a 'religious speaker', let alone one of the main speakers at Ershad.⁵¹ Implicitly suggesting that certain programmes at Ershad could be educational rather than religious, he hinted that as an educator he should not be judged by the standards of religious speakers. Excluding himself from the rank of religious speakers and categorizing himself as a teacher and a specialist at Ershad, Shari'ati was effectively suggesting a way out of the stand-off.

Unable to hide his disappointment and anger at his arbitrary exclusion, Shari'ati exclaimed that he had spent his youth between the two barren deserts of 'mullahs

and modernists'. Seeking the message of each, he claimed to have learnt that the doctrinaire clergy turned people into donkeys (*estehmar*) and the worldly people exploited them. He, therefore, ran away from both. Shari'ati ended his letter with an allegory and wrote that after his trials, having heard of a spring in the desert, he turned towards it only to find that 'the elders who considered themselves the successors of the tradition of Abraham and the guardians of Ka'ba had converted Ka'ba into a house for idol-worshipping'.⁵²

Shari'ati's sweet and sour letter to the strong-men of Ershad must have made an important impression on them. Yet his predicament had become part and parcel of the greater battle between the clergy and layman for complete control. For the founders of Ershad, accepting the exclusion of Shari'ati meant also accepting the standards determined by the clergy legitimized in an all-powerful Clerical Council.⁵³ As the term for the existing Board of Directors was coming to an end, Motahhari was waiting to implement his agenda through a new Board of Directors.⁵⁴ From January 1971, Motahhari chose to gradually decrease his participation at Ershad and opted for a wait and see posture. Between the end of November 1970 and the end of February 1971, the internal problems at Ershad led to a noticeable lull in its regular activities. Reducing his own lectures during the months of Dey, Bahman and Esfand, Motahhari, however, did not leave the field to 'unfriendly strangers'. The speakers during this period were essentially members of his own circle. The non-clerical speakers allowed during this period were dignitaries with a considerable background of traditional Islamic studies, such as Mohammad-Taqi Shari'ati and Zaryab Kho'i.

An Unexpected Reinstatement

As a part of his sulking act, Motahhari might have made the fatal error of refusing to accompany the regular Ershad group to the *haj* of 1970-71. Shari'ati, who had accompanied the group the year before, was no longer entitled to time off from his teaching at the university. During the winter of 1970, while Shari'ati was still excluded, a few members of Ershad's Board of Directors went to Mashhad and pleaded with the Chancellor of Mashhad University, Abdollah Faryar, to agree to give Shari'ati time off so that he could accompany them on the *haj*. In the face of their insistence, Faryar is said to have given Shari'ati permission to take a second leave of absence.⁵⁵ It is evident that between 20 January and 20 February, when Shari'ati was not delivering his usual speeches along every step of the *haj*, he and Minachi had sufficient time to discuss alternatives to Motahhari's demands.

The point raised by Shari'ati in his letter to Minachi and Homayun on his own re-categorization as a teacher rather than a religious speaker, provided an excellent pretext to the non-clerical directors of Ershad. They could neutralize the adverse effect of the standards on Shari'ati, without directly undermining the authority or decision of the clerical members of the nine-man committee. Arguing

that specialized educational programmes fell under a completely different rubric from the regular religious programmes, it was contended that the speakers at the educational programmes were also exempt from the eligibility conditions set by the committee. The launching of an academic year-long series of classes at Ershad taught by Shari'ati, would have returned him to Ershad, allowed the clergy to save face and foiled their attempt at gaining absolute control over Ershad.

In a sensational declaration made on the night of 23 Esfand 1349 (14 March 1971) Ershad was to become a 'center for Islamology on a world scale'.⁵⁶ This ambitious project was based on expanding the library, research and publication facilities at Ershad and the introduction of a novel quasi-academic program at the university level. The centerpiece of this phase was a modern and scholarly presentation and analysis of Islam, especially Shi'ite Islam. Ali Shari'ati was invited to teach the first series of courses on the History of Religions, Sociology of Religion and Islamology. The courses were to be held bi-weekly for two and a half hours on Friday afternoons and were declared open to all university students of social sciences. Students could start registration immediately for courses to begin on 20 Farvardin 1350 (9 April 1971). It was also announced that female students would be segregated from male students. Both Motahhari and Beheshti, who were among the audience at Ershad's main lecture hall, left in protest after the declaration was read.⁵⁷ The unexpected announcement of this dazzling project impressed the regulars at Ershad; but more important, it confronted Motahhari and his friends with a fait accompli. It was in this respect that Motahhari characterized the events that occurred in Ershad during the last two weeks of Esfand as a *coup d'état*.⁵⁸

According to Minachi, after the announcement of Shari'ati's academic programme, an agreement was reached with Motahhari on dividing the two main activities at Ershad.⁵⁹ Motahhari agreed to head the research activities, while the responsibility for educational activities was given to Shari'ati.⁶⁰ Even though the division of labour may have been based on Motahhari's consent, his letter to the Board of Directors and the Consultative Committee clearly indicates that he was indignant at the new turn of events. Motahhari maintained that it was not until the night of Ashura, a few days before the 'blitzkrieg' that he realized what had been decided behind his back. Also informed that the issue of successors to the Founding Members, the rapid appointment of which he had pressed for, had been decided without his knowledge and against his interest, Motahhari accused Ershad's management of 'ignominy if not treason'.⁶¹ He considered Shari'ati's classes to be a violation of the decisions of the Committee for the Establishment of Standards and the Consultative Committee.⁶² Despite the fact that his lectures at Ershad on the two extremely significant nights of Ashura and Tasu'a were previously announced and advertised, Motahhari demonstrated his fury by a sudden decision not to speak, hoping that his much remarked absence would foil the pending 'coup'.

On the very same night Shari'ati, completely in the dark over these new developments, mourned his fate. In a work supposedly written on this night and entitled, 'It was the night of Ashura of 1349 and what a painful night it was', he told the

story of his shattered dreams and aspirations. All alone, confined to his room in Mashhad, he believed that he had become a 'victim of expediency'. Unaware of what was going on in Tehran, he complained that those he considered to be his friends were effectively sacrificing him to those who insulted and spread rumours about him. His martyrdom at the hands of his friends, Shari'ati maintained, satisfied his enemies, acquitted his friends and resolved the problem that had been created.⁶³ In his melodramatic style, Shari'ati drew a parallel between his own destiny, that of the Iranian people and Imam Hossein.⁶⁴ Through grieving Imam Hossein's martyrdom people mourned their own tragedy, demanded their usurped rights and wept over their trampled pride. Shari'ati described the pain and degradation of these living martyrs who suppressed their desire to revolt. For them he said, life was a continuous tragedy, every corner of the world was Karbala, every month of the year was Moharram and every day of the month Ashura.⁶⁵ Identifying himself as a martyr, Shari'ati argued that Ashura was the ever-recurring story of all those persecuted for their quest to seek 'justice and equality of classes and races'.⁶⁶

From his own assessment of the situation at the time, it is evident that Shari'ati did not believe he had any chance of returning to Ershad. Shari'ati evaluated his situation at Ershad in a poetical and macabre fashion. 'The sky was dark, the night was black, obscurity reigned, the gleam of the wolves eyes was the only light that came to sight, the howling of the jackal was the only sound to be heard, conspiracies were in the making while slanderers and the malicious were busily chattering'.⁶⁷

It must, therefore, be concluded that Shari'ati's return to Ershad was the work of Minachi and Homayun who did not wish to lose him. As much as they respected and wished to secure the continuing collaboration of Motahhari and his friends, Minachi and Homayun believed that Shari'ati was playing a key role in articulating a much needed Islamic doctrine.⁶⁸ Shari'ati had won the war, but he had not himself been involved in the battles.

From the night of Ashura 1971, Motahhari never again spoke at Ershad.⁶⁹ In the Iranian tradition of trying to heal wounds and bridge gaps between estranged old friends, many well-wishers tried to reconcile the differences between Motahhari and Shari'ati. Believing that the dispute was only due to differences in taste and a clash of egos, politically conscious individuals felt that if the two men could set their differences aside the significant momentum created at Ershad could bear more important social and political fruits. To the non-clerical well-wishers, who could not assess the depth and breadth of Shari'ati's challenge to the religious establishment, the schism between the two men only strengthened the hands of the more conservative religious elements and weakened the rank of the enlightened Islamists. According to Ali-Baba'i, while the well-wishers were trying to bring the feuding parties together, certain elements in the bazaar, close to Motahhari and well represented on Ershad's Consultative Committee, prodded him to press on his demands and effectively rendered any reconciliation impossible.⁷⁰

Even though Motahhari terminated his active association with Ershad in March

1971, certain promises were made to him indicating that a compromise could be reached and some of his demands met. By September of 1971, after some six months of negotiations, Motahhari's writings indicate that some sort of solution involving his return to Ershad was close at hand. Motahhari even referred to the future as a 'new epoch at Ershad' and insisted that its new composition and organization had to be publicly announced. However, he continued to insist that his participation and the return of his friends was contingent upon the formation of the Clerical Council and that the formation of that body was contingent upon the constitution of a Board of Trustees, a new Board of Directors and the appointment of successors to the founding members.⁷¹ Motahhari's conditions, which in fact called for the surrendering of all key decision-making positions to him and his friends were not met and the rupture was finalized in October 1971. From 23 July 1971, Motahhari had already started speaking at the al-Javad mosque. Gradually his old clerical friends gravitated towards al-Javad, which became their bastion.

A clash of personalities at Ershad evolved into a string of disputes and finally terminated with the departure of Motahhari. What was originally a clash of personalities between Motahhari and Minachi became a controversy between two different Islamic discourses appealing to two different audiences. Shari'ati represented one interpretation and Motahhari was forced into defending and finally representing another. As Shari'ati galvanized the debate on the definition of Islam, the dichotomy of Islam and the responsibility of the authentic Muslims, he came in the limelight, while Motahhari was pushed out into the shadowlands. On a personal level, Shari'ati's increasing popularity sowed the seeds of Motahhari's envy. Motahhari, the intellectual cleric could neither rupture his ties with his background, educational upbringing and his garb, nor could he tolerate the political excesses and controversial religious innovations of someone whom he thought was his protégé. Under Shari'ati's incessant attacks on the traditional clergy's hide-bound view of Islam and finally their categorization as polytheists, Motahhari chose not to abandon his family for an outsider, even if at first he felt great sympathy for his words. Shari'ati did represent some of Motahhari's own ideas, but in a more radical and fiery manner. Shari'ati picked up his criticism of the traditional clergy where Motahhari had left his. Was it not Motahhari who, some nine years earlier, had argued that inflicted by populism, the Shi'i clergy were incapable of leading society, since they were always condemned to trail conservative and change-resistant commoners? Had Motahhari not accused the clergy of defending the status quo and had he not pressed the religious dignitaries to take action and reform the clerical institution, *rowhaniyat*, lest all would be lost to 'those newly born shrines'?⁷²

Restoration

On the day of Ashura (8 March 1971), Mohammad-Taqi Shari'ati replaced Morteza Motahhari as the main speaker at Ershad. The title of his lecture was, ironically, 'Revolution and counter-revolution on Ashura'. The other speaker on this day was Hashemi-Rafsanjani, for although Motahhari never spoke again his friends such as Rafsanjani, Khaz'ali, Hasheminejad and Bahonar continued to lecture for another month. In order to compel Minachi to accept Motahhari's demands, however, the clerical speakers gradually cancelled their lectures, practically boycotting Ershad.¹ The last lecture by a member of Motahhari's inner group during this period was by Bahonar on 9 April 1971.² The second speaker on that same afternoon was Ali Shari'ati who began his first lecture on 'The history and mastery of Religions'. In effect 9 April 1971 marked the end of Motahhari's sway at Ershad.

The departure of Motahhari and his influential friends did not put an end to the disputes between the clergy and Shari'ati. On the contrary, now his clerical opponents could freely attack him and Ershad as they no longer risked compromising the influential clerics previously associated with the institution. Books and pamphlets attacking Shari'ati personally, and his discourse, started to appear regularly from October 1971, only five months after Motahhari's departure. The only two consequential clerical figures who broke rank and remained at Ershad were Sayyed Morteza Shabestari and Sadreddin Ballaghi. Their courageous act, construed as disloyalty to the clerical institution, earned them condemnation and invective. Even Mohammad-Taqi Shari'ati, who for two nights had lectured in Motahhari's place, stayed away from Ershad for about eight months hoping, and trying, to talk Motahhari into returning. But breaking the embargo on Ershad meant taking issue with the clergy, a move that even at that time many preferred to avoid.

The Nascent Iranian Guerrilla Movement

By the time Shari'ati returned to Ershad the political landscape in Iran had under-

the gendarmerie outpost in the village of Siahkal had come under attack. On 17 March 1971, thirteen men charged with participating in the Siahkal insurgency were executed. It was not until 4 April 1971 that Sabeti the head of SAVAK's first bureau, appeared on television to discuss the Siahkal operation. Long in preparation, the incident was a premature attack by nine heavily armed members of the 'mountain' group of an organization which at the time identified itself as 'The Armed Revolutionary Movement' (Jonbesh Mosalahaneh Enqelabi) and had already started urban guerilla activities in July of 1970 by attacking and expropriating two banks in Tehran. After its Siahkal operations, during the last days of March 1971, some of its surviving members – most prominent among them Hamid Ashraf and Mohammad Safari-Ashtiyani – joined forces with the Ahmadzadeh-Puyan group and founded the Marxist-Leninist Peoples' Fada'ian of Iran.

Although the Siahkal operation was a complete military failure, it shattered the stifling semblance of political stability that had come to reign after the religious uprising of 15 Khordad in 1963 and sent an important signal to the revolutionary youth who had become impatient with the inertia. Siahkal enthroned the idea that, in the repressive political conditions of Iran, armed revolutionary struggle was the only effective means of inducing political and social change. The necessity of armed struggle and the categorical rejection of any other method of resistance became an unassailable dogma in most Iranian revolutionary circles. Siahkal also proved that it was possible to form a clandestine revolutionary group. Its success, it was argued, would depend on professional revolutionary expertise that could only be gained through revolutionary praxis. Having attracted the attention of the politicized young through its 'heroic' and 'romantic' à la Che guerrilla operation, the revolutionary left presented itself as the only viable vanguard of the coming revolution.

After Siahkal, the perception that politicized intellectuals should become guerilla partisans and in this way fulfill their revolutionary responsibility to the masses gained unprecedented popularity. Politicized university and high school students now had, in the heroes of Siahkal, a role model, and a simplified Leninist ideology to follow. What made the prescription even more attractive was that it was part and parcel of an international movement successfully sweeping across the underdeveloped countries seeking liberation from imperialism. The aura of political resignation, impotence and revolutionary lethargy had been demolished and revolutionary activism, voluntarism and heroism bred bolder and bloodier acts as more intellectuals came to view armed struggle as the only possible alternative. The politicized young were convinced that the only logic the shah's regime would comprehend was the staccato of machine guns. The tremor had produced an important and long-lasting socio-political landslide.

The public that Shari'ati faced after his return was, therefore, more politicized and far more revolutionary about what it would accept as socio-political solutions. And it was this more militant posture to leadership and preaching, the radicalized audience

compete with a modern and 'scientific' world ideology such as Marxism–Leninism, it too had to address relevant socio-political and economic issues and prescribe just as revolutionary solutions.

Siabkal had not only influenced Shari'ati's public but the man himself. On the morning after the newspapers broke the news of the incident, Shari'ati's students were curious to find out what their teacher felt and had to say about the event. As usual they converged on the university cafeteria, their regular meeting place, confident that Shari'ati would eventually show up. Walking into the cafeteria, Shari'ati's face was expressionless. One of his students, who had been put up by the rest to pose the delicate question, shyly asked Shari'ati's opinion on Siabkal. Typically, Shari'ati responded with a parable. 'On his way to exile' he recounted, 'Mr [Mahmud] Taleqani stayed in Mashhad for a night. During his short stay, he was asked whether he thought Fidel Castro would end up in heaven or hell. Taleqani's answer to the curious interviewer was that if Castro did not get into paradise, would a puny (*shireh'i*) person like him ever get in?' Having told the story Shari'ati walked off.³

On another occasion, immediately after the Siabkal operation, Shari'ati was asked what he thought of Marxists and to everyone's surprise, he is said to have responded, 'I am a Marxist myself.'⁴ By this figurative statement did Shari'ati intend to condone the armed struggle or did he wish to sympathize with the socio-political ideals of the guerillas? Even though the latter proposition may seem more likely, since until this time Shari'ati had been far from a revolutionary voluntarist, the statement may mark the beginning of Shari'ati's change of opinion on revolutionary action.

The organization which later became known as the Peoples' Mojahedin of Iran was also catapulted into revolutionary armed struggle as a result of the Siabkal operation. Having prepared themselves since 1968 and spent long months awaiting the return of a sufficient number of their trainees from Palestinian guerrilla camps, before starting their armed struggle, the Mojahedin were forced into action. Wishing to rival the activities of the Marxist–Leninist Fada'ian, the revolutionary Muslims decided to disrupt the pompous celebrations of Iran's 2,500 years of monarchy before scores of foreign heads of states and dignitaries at Persopolis which were to begin on 12 October 1971. After long discussions, the group decided to launch a series of daring attacks on sensitive targets such as dams and electric power plants. Before putting their plan into action, the leading members of the Mojahedin were arrested. The arrest of the group's ideological nucleus accentuated Shari'ati's dual feeling about the pressing responsibility of intellectuals. Although he believed that the pressing task of radical Muslims was to articulate a coherent ideology before entering into action, the revolutionary acts of the armed vanguard left him unsettled and perturbed. These were young intellectuals who, in the tradition of all enlightened martyrs, were actively defying the powers at the cost of their lives. Emphasizing theoretical work, remaining in-

who were thirsty for immediate action. Caught between the rational position of theory before action and the growing emotional and popular notion of learning about revolution by practising revolution, Shari'ati's position moved towards preaching praxis and propagating anti-establishment revolutionary thought. In his last few speeches at Ershad, Shari'ati became a proponent of revolutionary action.

Shari'ati's Ershad

Even though, with Motahhari's departure, Shari'ati became Ershad's central figure, between April and July 1971 he could not concentrate all his efforts on the institution. As a full-time professor at Mashhad University, he was forced to divide his time between his teaching assignments and his engagements at Ershad. Subsequently, he commuted regularly by plane between Mashhad and Tehran – a task facilitated, it is said, by an old friendship between Faryar, Chancellor of Mashhad University, and the brother of Ershad's founder, Mohammad Homayoun.⁵

Shari'ati's hectic pace of life eased during the summer of 1971 as both the University and Ershad closed down for the annual holidays. At the end of summer, Shari'ati along with four other faculty members at Mashhad – Cyrus Sahami, Manuchehr Bayat-Mokhtari, Qolam-Reza Zatalian and Vahab Vali – were informed that they would receive their regular salary but would have to stay at home, refrain from meeting colleagues or students and were banned from teaching until further notice.⁶ Matini, the dean of the Faculty of Literature, believes the decision was probably due to the desire of the security services to keep the five politicized professors out of the University until the Persepolis celebrations, which were to start in the first week of October, were over.⁷ Sahami, however, recalls that the reason given to them for their ban was that during a conference on Higher Education at Ramsar, the shah had criticized the universities as the cradle of guerilla activities, targeted the University of Mashhad and had given Faryar a list of teachers to be purged.⁸ During the period he was told to stay away, Sahami remembered that his home was regularly under surveillance, a condition that probably applied to all five men. After some four weeks, with the exception of Shari'ati, they were once again permitted to resume their teaching.⁹ Matini recalls that later Faryar informed him that Shari'ati would be sent to the Office of Mashhad University at the Ministry of Higher Education in Tehran.¹⁰ According to Matini, the transfer must have been effected by SAVAK, which had no desire to see Shari'ati continue his teaching at Mashhad University and yet did not want to fire him.¹¹

Sometime in October, Shari'ati arrived at his new post at the Research Department of the Ministry of Higher Education in Tehran. His official position was that of a researcher and his contract was initially for a few months. On his arrival, Shari'ati began working on a research project entitled, 'Education and Maktab'

described the functioning and structure of the traditional educational system throughout its different levels. Shari'ati eulogized the traditional system, both at the primary and higher levels, as highly effective, open and free.¹² He praised the traditional school system as well as the seminary schools for their flexibility and adaptability to the needs and capabilities of individual students.¹³ At the seminary schools, Shari'ati observed, it was the students who chose their classes and their teachers.¹⁴ Comparing the Western to the Islamic educational system, Shari'ati tried to prove the superiority of the Islamic by listing twenty-two distinctive features. For example, he argued that society, constituted the main subject of the Western philosophy of education, whereas human beings were the main subject of the Islamic philosophy. Also, whereas Western education was in pursuit of power, the Islamic education was in pursuit of the truth.¹⁵ Kazemzadeh, the Minister of Higher Education at the time, who was also known for his piety, is said to have been very impressed by Shari'ati's report and had recommended it to others.¹⁶

On Shari'ati's arrival at Tehran, Ershad rented a two-bedroom apartment for him and for Mohammad Taqi on the Old Shemiran road, right in front of the Ershad complex.¹⁷ Sheikh Qassem was also employed by Ershad to clean up the place, wash the dishes and do the errands. Later, Shari'ati's detractors, intent on using anything they could find to attack him, promoted Sheikh Qassem to the position of Shari'ati's special cook. Familiar with Ali's mannerisms and idiosyncracies, the management of Ershad wanted him housed close to the lecture hall. But his proximity did not assure Shari'ati's punctuality. He could not be on time for his regular classes, let alone for his occasional topical lectures. Frequently, after some twenty minutes or more of delay and as the packed audience gradually grew more restless, someone was sent across the road to get him behind the podium. When in class his students criticized his poor time-keeping and asked for explanations, Shari'ati readily admitted to his 'vice' and asked for forgiveness. He blamed his carelessness on his own 'undisciplined state of mind', which he claimed to be worsening as time went by.¹⁸

In Tehran, Shari'ati was separated from his wife and his four children, of whom the youngest, Mona, was less than six months old. Shari'ati's family life had never been smooth or easy. In one of his writings, he compared marital life with living in a communist country. Referring to a saying about marriage, yet without commenting on whether he believed or disbelieved it, he wrote, 'It [marriage] is like a castle, whoever lives outside is tempted to come in and whoever lives inside, dreams of getting out!'¹⁹ Heroes, revolutionaries and rebels who feel responsible for the well-being of social units far larger than the family cannot be tied down to family responsibilities which often constrain their freedom to do and say what is right and truthful. Selflessness and total dedication to the people and the just cause, which Shari'ati preached to his students, stood in contradiction with demands that the family placed on the person. Shari'ati felt the pain of the contradiction and had become accustomed to living with it. Alone in Tehran he had one less

full time, from 29 October 1971 he was intent on totally devoting himself to the politico-religious education of a young and energetic audience who he hoped would become his 'messengers' throughout society. He spent his hours lecturing, discussing with his students, jotting down ideas that came to him, organizing cultural events such as plays and meeting with the small circle of people whose company he continued to enjoy. At Ershad, Shari'ati embarked on de-constructing traditional Islam and re-constructing a modern Islamic ideology, relevant to the problems and needs of his audience.

Soon, word spread of the prodigal thinker and speaker whose sharp tongue did not spare any idea or institution which he believed was allied with capital, political power and polytheistic religion, to exploit, oppress and stupify the people. The crowds became so large that they could not get into Ershad's main lecture hall, and often a congregation of large groups burst out of its spacious courtyard to stand outside the building listening to Shari'ati's voice over loudspeakers. Traffic jams around Ershad and on the Old Shemiran road, one of the two main axes connecting Tehran to Shemiran became a regular feature of Tehran life, especially on Friday afternoons. A regular attendant recalls that on Friday mornings different groups of high school and university students would go mountain climbing, the favourite sporting activity of politicized intellectuals, in the north of Tehran. On Friday afternoons, many of these groups would descend on Hosseiniyeh and attend Shari'ati's lectures. Ershad gradually became a regular hangout for politicized intellectuals of different kinds, but especially those with an Islamic tendency.

The impressive number of students who attended each of Shari'ati's lectures came as a surprise even to him. At first he thought that perhaps as the novelty of his ideas and speeches faded away, the numbers would also decline. Surprised and delighted at the growing popularity of his 'message', he publicly announced that the favourable response to his lectures 'gave him hope and dented his despair, which was gradually becoming his religion.'²⁰ Shari'ati was a natural performer. The energy that he generated among his audience rebounded and further electrified the man, the lecture hall, and his enticed listeners. As the audience's response became more passionate, his mind became more agile and less circumscribed, his lectures more fiery and his audience more enchanted. Shari'ati became the bewitching voice of the message his listeners wanted to hear but nobody dared articulate, or could articulate so enticingly.

In a revealing account, Ali Davani, a scholarly cleric, provides a lucid description of the 'Shari'ati fever'. He recalls that one Friday afternoon, in the heat of Shari'ati's success, probably around the Autumn of 1971, as he was waiting for a taxi on the Old Shemiran road a black car pulled up in front of him. Davani recognized Motahhari sitting in the back seat of the car, inviting him to get in. As the two men discussed various current events, the car reached Hosseiniyeh Ershad. A large bustling crowd of young people had gathered in front of the building, some sitting on the steps, others simply hanging around on the pavement. The majority

traffic jam in front of Ershad, Motahhari was recognized by the crowd. They pointed him out to one another with a sarcastic smile and sometimes faked a loud mocking laughter. According to Davani, they were clearly making fun of Motahhari for having left Shari'ati and Ershad.²² Motahhari, who was conscious of the students' ridicule, complained to Davani that Shari'ati was responsible for the aggressive and rude behaviour of religious youngsters and lamented their ungracious treatment of a member of the clergy who had until recently organized the programmes at Ershad.²³

The Clerical Opposition to Shari'ati

The success of Shari'ati's lectures was obviously at the expense of the targets of his attacks. Each group had a different assessment of Shari'ati's danger to their power and each reacted differently. Members or representatives of the capitalist class, a group which Shari'ati assailed, had mixed reactions. The industrial capitalists were either completely uninformed about, or indifferent to, his discourse. However, the merchant capitalists of the bazaar, who had firm links with religious associations, reacted very differently. One group is said to have sided with, prompted and even pushed Motahhari to oppose Shari'ati. This group continued to fuel the anti-Shari'ati campaign. Another well-respected and influential group of bazaar merchants became so mesmerized by Shari'ati's style, his love of social justice and his new Islamic discourse that it was deaf to his anti-capitalist arguments which eventually threatened their interests. To this day, some of their surviving members sit under the picture of Shari'ati on their wall and talk of their love and admiration for him and their successful commercial exploits in the same breath! Such merchants made a significant moral contribution to Ershad and supported Shari'ati against his enemies playing an important role in the success of the institutions' religio-political life until its closure.

The clergy, who after the death of Ayatollah Borujerdi lacked a strong and centralized leadership inside the country reacted to Shari'ati in a disorganized fashion. The clerical response came in three different waves, each representing the concerns of a different rank of the clergy. It also reflected the gravity of Shari'ati's incessant attacks on the basic principles of clerically-defined Shi'i thought.

The first anti-Shari'ati wave was orchestrated and conducted by a vocal and highly visible, yet hierarchically light-weight group of preachers (*vo'az*), known as 'the ten opponents of Shari'ati and Ershad'. The second came from a more reputable group associated with the teaching staff at the Qom seminary school and the reputable journal, *Darsha'i az Maktab-e Eslami* (Lessons from the School of Islam). The third came as legal opinions or *fatwas* of religious authorities. Of different degrees of influence and significance, the legal opinion of the *mujtaheds* first surfaced in August of 1972 and continued until after Shari'ati's death.

Shi'i discourse of Shari'ati, the anti-Shari'ati group of preachers called themselves *velayati* or believers in obedience to the rule of the Twelve Shi'i Imams. They included Seyyed Ebrahim Milani, an old friend of Shari'ati who preached in Mashhad and Tehran; Sheikh Qassem Eslami, a regular preacher at Masjed-e Shisheh on Jami street; Sheikh Mohammad-Ali Ansari-Qomi, who preached at the Ayatollah Tonekaboni Mosque in Tadjrish; Hossein Rowshani who was the prayer leader at Moftabad and Ebrahim Ansari-Zanjani, who was a preacher in Tehran. These five also contributed the majority of anti-Shari'ati publications that appeared between 1971 and 1976. At Mahdiyeh, located near the main bazaar, the famous Tehran preacher Sheikh Ahmad Kafi, whose sermons attracted very large crowds of listeners, joined the anti-Shari'ati chorus in force during November of 1971. He accused Shari'ati of Sunnism, mocking Islam and undermining the faith of believers.²⁴ Sheikh Mohammad-Taqi Falsafi, the most influential preacher in Tehran, Javad Manaqebi and Scyyed Ali-Naqi Tehrani were also associated with this group. Haj Ashraf Kashani, a prominent Tehran preacher who settled scores with Shari'ati by proclaiming Abu Zar, Shari'ati's Islamic role-model, a common thief was also a member of the *velayati* group. All these preachers appealed to the mosque-going common and non-intellectual Muslims. Their objections started with Shari'ati's two articles in *Mohammad the Last of the Prophets*.

The first concerted attack on Ershad and Shari'ati while Motahhari was still there started with a five page 'Letter of Introduction to Ershad' to which four more pages were added after the departure of Motahhari. The final version of this vilifying document was signed by Seyyed Sadreddin Jazayeri, his son Seyyed Morteza Jazayeri and Seyyed Morteza Asgari who Shari'ati later called one of the clerical symbols of Safavid Shi'ism.²⁵ This pamphlet was widely distributed in Tehran's mosques and its content was included in Ansari-Qomi's book *Defa' az Hossein-e Shahid*, published in November 1971. This book, which was an admonition of Ne'matollah Salehi's (Najafabadi) *Shahid-e Javid*, should also be considered as the first book against Shari'ati and Ershad. The Jazayeris, who were closely related to Ayatollah Milani, conducted their campaign from the Jazayeri mosque which was located at the edge of the cobblers' bazaar. Morteza Jazayeri's membership of Ayatollah Milani's inner circle of confidants and his position as the ayatollah's close political counsellor, gave the Jazayeris greater respectability among the *vo'az*. The fact that the Jazayeris were the first among the *vo'az* to rally against Shari'ati and Ershad and that Ayatollah Milani was first among the high-ranking clergy to condemn Ershad and Shari'ati, was therefore, not coincidental.

At first, the objections to Shari'ati were centered around four main historical and factual topics all related to classical Shi'i-Sunni differences. As staunch devotees of the house of Ali, this group of preachers viewed any hesitation over the absolute evilness of the first three caliphs as a sign of pro-Sunni tendencies. The real issue, however, was probably that Shari'ati was considered to be a non-clerical intruder meddling in religious affairs and trying to be successful at it. Members

characterized primarily by its commitment to rites and rituals, a fanatical and non-intellectual adoration for Ali and his family and an equally fanatical hatred for anything that resembled leniency towards Sunnis. Mohammad-Ali Ansari-Qomi, one of Shari'ati's most vocal and scathing foes criticized the way religious ceremonies were conducted at Ershad. Referring to Shari'ati's mannerisms, he explained, 'as a pious and religious preacher you should wear a beard, you should begin your lecture with reference to the name of God and then the name of the Prophet, at the mention of whose name you should call for a blessing (*salawat*). You should finish your speech by cursing and damning the enemies of the house of Mohammad [the Sunnis]. You should refer to Imam Hossein and make your audience weep. You should pray for improvements in the welfare of Muslims and finish your discourse in the name of the Twelfth Imam who is in occultation'.²⁶

The fact that this first antagonistic group were mainly *vo'az*, or preachers at various popular mosques, indicates that Shari'ati's popularity and his novel discourse seemed to threaten their social role as the sole interpreters of the faith, and therefore their popularity and socio-economic status. Mohammad Moqimi, whose name is said to be an alias for Seyyed Ebrahim Milani, a cousin of the prominent ayatollah, echoed the concerns of this group. Referring to Shari'ati's so-called Sunni tendencies and 'animosity' towards the house of Mohammad, Moqimi wrote: 'Should this act of treason and murder become ever more popular by the day? And should we allow the number of the misguided to continue increasing?'²⁷

Shari'ati's lecture, 'Ali's Shi'ism and Safavid Shi'ism', probably constitutes a threshold in the clergy's assessment of his ideas and their relationship with him. For Sheikh Qassem Eslami the distinction between 'Ali's Shi'ism and Safavid Shi'ism' was 'the first act of treason in the world of Shi'ism'.²⁸ According to Ansari-Qomi, the lecture convinced the clergy that Shari'ati was not only intent on destroying the basis of their faith, but that his teachings were taking solid root within society.²⁹ Ansari-Qomi recounts that in Tehran he met with 'different groups and types of Shari'ati's followers', all of whom were so devoted that it was impossible for him to convince them of Shari'ati's fallacious propositions. Mournfully, Ansari-Qomi admitted that many of Shari'ati's followers came from families which had, for generations, been firm believers in the traditional Islam of the clergy.³⁰

Those who wished to sooth the clergy by reminding them of Shari'ati's services, argued that he had saved the young from moral decadence since, instead of going to discotheques, cabarets and cafés, they were now flocking to Hosseiniyeh Ershad. Sheikh Qassem Eslami's reaction to this line of defence was representative of the way the majority of the traditional clergy felt about Shari'ati. Eslami argued that before the advent of Shari'ati, the youth were engaging in sin (*fisq*), yet they had not lost their faith, nor were they bitterly hostile towards Shi'ism and the services rendered by known Islamic scholars.³¹ The argument that sin was better than apostasy and Shari'ati was training apostates became a prevailing conviction among the most conservative clerics.

fokoli (someone who wears a tie) who was trying to teach Islam based on his education at foreign universities.³² Shari'ati's harsh criticism and refutation of classical Shi'i references infuriated the clergy. The fact that he replaced accepted Shi'i sources with works such as the *Tarikh-e Tabari* and *Siareh-e Ibn-Hesham* led to incessant accusations of Sunnism and anti-Shi'ism. Shari'ati criticized the works and the socio-political behaviour of such luminaries of traditional Shi'ism as Mohammad Baqer Majlesi, author of the *Bahar al-Anwar* and Abbas Qomi author of the *Mafateh al-Finan* and *Montahi al-Amal*.³³ He even questioned the authenticity of certain *hadith* in *Usul-e Kafi* by Koleyni, one of the most highly regarded Shi'i Islamic jurists.³⁴ He accused both Majlesi and Koleyni of propagating reports which could be used to present a 'fascist Islam' and 'a racist Prophet'.³⁵

Mocking certain commonly-held religious notions such as reciting a prayer which would suddenly turn one's enemy into a cockroach or one that would make one instantaneously rich, Shari'ati ruthlessly attacked the traditional clergy for propagating such superstitious nonsense.³⁶ He ridiculed the content of the painstakingly detailed and socially irrelevant Islamic notions and rituals described in the works and various manuals of prominent Islamic jurists.³⁷ In the process he derided such high-level dignitaries as Ayatollah Golpayegani for his manual on performing the *haj* ceremony.³⁸ As Shari'ati questioned the old sources and references, the rationality, application and relevance of their content and thereby the authority and legitimacy of established Shi'i jurists, the clerical establishment felt more threatened. It was as if Shari'ati had suddenly changed the rules and interpretations of Islam by using a different manual and different sources.

Ershad, and Shari'ati in particular, were also attacked for activities there and the comportment of those who frequented the institution. It's modernist approach to a religious environment was very different from the traditionally accepted norms and codes of conduct. At a Hosseiniyeh one should not sit on chairs, but on the floor, and the speaker should certainly not wear a tie, as Shari'ati did. The use of chairs was alleged to be an act of Sunnism.³⁹ The long hair of the photographer at Ershad was yet another source of complaint!

The most sensitive issue was, however, the attendance of women at Ershad. If, from the *velayatis'* point of view, Shari'ati's first cardinal sin was his animosity towards the house of Ali, his second misdeed was his attitude to women's participation at Ershad.⁴⁰ The fact that they could go there without the veil or the headscarf posed a serious problem for the traditionalists. A dress code did not exist at Ershad and therefore no one was refused entrance on the grounds of 'inappropriate clothing'. The women were, however, separated from the men and sat at the balcony of the main auditorium. The fact that some of the young women at Shari'ati's lectures wore mini-skirts enraged the traditional clergy. Moqimi called on the heads of families to restrain their children from going to Ershad⁴¹ while Ansari-Zanjani claimed that Shari'ati was opposed to the Islamic veil or *hijab* and that his attitude paved the way for 'the circulating accounts of sexual relations at Ershad'.⁴² Argu-

deceived', Ansari-Qomi accused Shari'ati of enticing them to 'leave their homes' thus plunging them into 'licentiousness and prostitution'.⁴³ It is said that under enormous pressure from the traditionalists, and faced with all their calumnies, Shari'ati kept his calm. On the rumours of women's 'inappropriate' dress and 'moral laxity', however, he lost his cool. One day after his lecture, a man approached him and said, 'Doctor Shari'ati, you are always talking about Islam, but are you aware of the fact that girls come here in mini-skirts?' Shari'ati exploded screaming, 'why are you talking such nonsense and in any case if they are wearing mini-skirts why do you look at them!'.⁴⁴ Shari'ati responded to his clerical detractors on this point by organizing two seminars on women in July and November of 1972.

In the writings of his clerical enemies there was also an element of professional indignation, rivalry and jealousy. Shari'ati was not only butting in their affairs but derided their ignorance in a job they had been peacefully practising for years. He called the preachers, *vo'az*, half-witted dropouts of traditional seminary schools who were intellectually incapable of becoming *majtaheds* or jurists.⁴⁵ He was damaging the reputation and socio-religious image of the clergy and they could obviously not remain indifferent. Moqimi, for example, cited Shari'ati's attack on the preachers lamenting that his followers had become so defiant as to not only mock the clergy but also the Sources of Imitation, accusing them of being 'retrograde and despised by society and individuals'.⁴⁶ In response to 'the Shari'ati phenomenon', his enemies poured ceaseless invectives on him: Wahhabi, Sunni, liar, treacherous, poisonous, irreligious, anti-religious, apostate, westoxicated, a pawn of colonialism, a Pied Piper and ignorant of Islamic law and history.

The pulpit and the pen were used extensively by the *vo'az* to attack and discredit Shari'ati. All the same, a three-volume series written by Hossein Rowshani is probably the only scholarly and well-documented critique of his works. Shari'ati even recommended the first of this series to his students. Rowshani took Shari'ati up on a simple and pertinent issue. To prove that Islam symbolizes liberation from sexual, racial and class discrimination, Shari'ati argued that God had ordered Abraham to build His home, the Ka'ba, nearby the home of Hajar, a slave who became Abraham's second wife. Shari'ati had argued that Hajar was the only person buried in the Ka'ba, and Muslims were told to circumbulate it during the *hajj* to pay respect to the status of Hajar, who symbolized the oppressed. This, Shari'ati claimed, was a revolution typical of Islam.⁴⁷ Rowshani retorted respectfully that Shari'ati's assertion was not factual. On the basis of twenty-two acknowledged Islamic sources and references he demonstrated that Hajar was buried alongside her son Esmail.⁴⁸ The idea that only a slave women was buried near or in the Ka'ba was, therefore, refuted by Rowshani, who characterized Shari'ati's writing as quasi-modern poetry.⁴⁹

Rowshani's critique pointed to a major problem with Shari'ati's works. He was more of an ideologue, using Islamic sources as the building blocks of his doctrine than a Muslim, free of all ideological preconceptions, seeking guidance in Islamic

pre-conceived visions, formulations and conceptions than in remaining faithful to facts and events. If facts could not be found, the end was important enough to justify the use of his fictive mind. Shari'ati felt perfectly at ease with the distortion of facts if they served a socio-political purpose. It would be imprudent, if not presumptuous, to take Shari'ati for an historian, a social scientist and a teacher of facts and events; for he was indeed only interested in those facts which served the cause of righteousness.

Shari'ati's repeated assertions that he was voicing an individual opinion, and that he was subject to error, was an important defensive shield behind which he openly said whatever he wished. He was not, however, forthcoming with an acknowledgement of his specific errors or omissions. From the clerical point of view, Shari'ati had made numerous blunders. He had asserted that Abu Bakr had led the prayers during the last days of the Prophet; that consultation or *showra* constituted a fundamental basis of Islamic government; that prophethood was not terminated after Mohammad; that Abdul Mutaleb and Abu Taleb were idol-worshippers; that the Prophet ordered the closing of all doors in his mosque except that of Abu Bakr; that Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius and Lao-tze were prophets; that polygamy, the veil and *shafa'at* (intercession) were all inconsistent with Islam; that music was an Islamic art; that the Safavids had humiliated and distorted Islam, and that the use of the *mohr*, the clay on which Shi'is place their forehead during prayers, was an act of idolatry.

The defamatory, vilifying and outrageously false statements made by Shari'ati's detractors allowed him to brush off his foes as ignorant, slanderous, reactionary back-biters. In his book, Ansari-Qomi had introduced Dr Shari'ati as a 'graduate of sociology, literature and medicine' from a school called 'Valliance' in Paris.⁵⁰ Ansari-Qomi had also confused Alliance Française, the language school which Shari'ati had attended, with 'Valliance'. Capitalizing on the outrageously ignorant comments of his enemies, Shari'ati possessed enough of an effective arsenal to attack his detractors and even stone-wall legitimate criticisms such as the one by Rowshani.

Once the members of the *velayati* group started branding Shari'ati as a 'religious saboteur' (*kharabkar-e mazhabi*) and pleading with the government to put an end to his activities, Shari'ati could claim in private that the clergy, in collusion with the Iranian security forces, were plotting against him and wanted to silence him. In public, he spoke of an alliance between the clergy of Safavid Shi'ism and 'polytheistic rulers' to 'silence the word of God' and 'crucify the spirit of God'.⁵¹ Asking for his imprisonment if not execution, Ansari-Qomi called on the Iranian government to deal with him as it did with the terrorists and saboteurs in the country. He warned the 'imperial government of Iran', the Iranian people and the Iranian clergy of the danger of Shari'ati and he wrote that: 'during the past 1,000 years, the history of Islam and Shi'i Islam has never, nor ever will, encounter a more dangerous, dreadful and bolder enemy than Ali Shari'ati'.⁵² In January 1973,

distributed by them he was accused of collaboration with SAVAK.⁵³

Ansari-Zanjani (not to be confused with Ansari-Qomi) threatened 'deviants' such as Shari'ati and Salehi with violence and force if they refused to accept the truth.⁵⁴ The fact that Shari'ati was publicly labelled as a 'second Kasravi' by almost all members of the *velayati* group suggested that a fate like that of Kasravi might await him. In private, Shari'ati seems to have told his close friends that his life was threatened by the clergy and their cohorts. Referring to the traditional and the monarchist clergy in public, he also spoke of his fear of the 'Safavids'.⁵⁵ To his students at Ershad he admitted his fear of saying more about the 'catastrophes, shamelessness and treacherous acts' of the traditional clergy. He ended one of his lectures dramatically, with these words: 'I cannot say any more, I am scared, I am sorry!'.⁵⁶ Shari'ati was also worried about his family in Mashhad, since on more than one occasion, in his absence, stones had been hurled at the window of their house.⁵⁷

By the end of October 1972, Alibaba'i recalls that he had become so worried about the possibility of an attempt on Shari'ati's life that he decided to ask Beheshti to intervene and end the boycott against Ershad. The anti-Shari'ati feelings whipped up by the *velayatis* were such that it was quite conceivable that a group of zealots would willingly 'stick a knife in Shari'ati's heart for the love of God and the Twelfth Imam'.⁵⁸ Alibaba'i recalls that even though both Beheshti and Hashemi-Rafsanjani seemed willing to come to Ershad's help, it was Motahhari who refused to resume his collaboration and insisted on his previous position.

Almost all publications against Shari'ati refer to the fact that as long as Motahhari and his circle of friends were at Ershad, things were conducted along proper Islamic lines. Qassem Eslami deplored how the 'preachers and the sermons' had suddenly changed and 'unknown speakers', had 'fabricated a sharp knife called Ali's Shi'ism'. Eslami accused Ali Shari'ati of sneering at the fundamental roots of Shi'ism.⁵⁹ Moqimi argued that once Shari'ati dropped his mask and it became clear that he was an enemy of Shi'ism, even Motahhari, who was an official member of Ershad, had left.⁶⁰ However, the Shi'i religious establishment at the time was not a homogeneous body. Paradoxically, some of Shari'ati's detractors targeted Motahhari in their attacks, labelling his works as the forerunner of Shari'ati's line of attack on the clergy.⁶¹ It would, therefore, be too simplistic to assume that all those who came to attack Shari'ati after 1971 were insigated by Motahhari and his associates.

It was in the second wave of clerical response to Shari'ati, characterized by a more academic framework, that criticisms from Motahhari's associates surfaced. In February 1972, Makarem Shirazi, a respectable and learned cleric, fired the first volley with a review article called 'Is an Islamic government based on consultation (*shura*)?'.⁶² The journal *Darsha'i az Maktab-e Eslam*, in which the article appeared, was the most established and widely read Islamic journal of the time. Makarem Shirazi, questioned Shari'ati's contention in *Eslamshenasi* that one of the funda-

Shirazi argued that the choice of Imam or the caliph on the basis of consultation (*shura*) went against the Shi'i belief that such a position was determined by God and appointed by the Prophet. Makarem Shirazi tried to demonstrate that Shari'ati did not believe in the key Shi'i principle of *itrat* or the primacy of lineage, determining the succession of Ali and his children after the death of the Prophet. If consultation, which resulted in the exclusion of Ali was a just Islamic principle, then what became of the Shi'ites historical claim to Ali's succession to the Prophet. Shari'ati's arguments were, therefore, rejected by Makarem Shirazi as 'baseless' and 'incorrect'.

Five months later, a second article appeared in *Darsha'i az Maktab-e Eslam* questioning Shari'ati's contention that the forbidden fruit in Eden was awareness. Shari'ati had made this statement in his seventh lecture on 'History and Mastery of Religions'.⁶³ The article, also said to have been written by Makarem Shirazi, stated that while the Old Testament specified that the forbidden fruit was knowledge and awareness, the Qur'an stipulated that Adam was endowed with knowledge before he dwelt in Eden.⁶⁴ Makarem Shirazi advised Shari'ati to discuss such technical matters with the experts in the field before publishing his ideas as a text. He concluded sarcastically, saying: 'we hope this friendly word of caution will be a reminder of the necessity of consultation, especially in the technical domains.' Not expecting to be attacked publicly by what he considered to be the more open-minded wing of the clergy, Shari'ati was clearly hurt by Makarem Shirazi's two articles. In a harshly worded letter, Shari'ati warned him against the invisible hands that were pulling the strings of those puppets whose only intention was to deepen the schism between the *ulama* and the intellectuals.⁶⁵ In a personal letter to a Razmjû, who had urged greater self-restraint in his approach to the clergy, Shari'ati wrote: 'I have to endure [what they say] and I will, but am I also to put up with [the authors in] *Maktab-e Eslam*? Should I consider them as the likes of Haj Ashraf?'.⁶⁶ Shari'ati concluded his letter by reminding his friend that the purpose of the articles in *Maktab-e Eslam* was to further discredit him publicly as a Sunni.⁶⁷

Two more references to Shari'ati appeared in the October and December issues of *Darsha'i az Maktab-e Eslam*. In the first article, which seemed favourable to Shari'ati, Makarem Shirazi maintained his position on the forbidden fruit, yet published references and sources sent in by the readers of the journal, confirming Shari'ati's position.⁶⁸ The last article appeared after the closure of Ershad, while Shari'ati was in hiding. It condemned those who interpreted the Qur'an in the preconceived way that they wanted instead of allowing the Qur'an to lead them along the correct path. Alluding to Shari'ati, the article suggested that those who imposed their will on the Qur'an were only playing with the divine verses and would therefore find themselves in hell.⁶⁹

Sensing the escalation of hostilities, Shari'ati prepared himself for *fatwas*, or authoritative religious pronouncements against himself. Responding to queries made by their pious followers on the validity and legitimacy of Shari'ati's state-

public. The last anti-Shari'ati wave employed the ultimate weapon of the clerical establishment. The anti-Shari'ati *fatwas* came during three distinct periods. Once Ershad resumed its activities after its regular summer holidays, the first concerted wave of condemnations started. On 23 August 1972, in response to a query by Qassem Damavandi, the highly influential Ayatollah Milani forbade his followers to attend Ershad or read Ershad's publications.⁷⁰ Without mentioning Shari'ati's name, Milani made public his disapprobation of Ershad, Shari'ati and his works. Implicitly referring to Shari'ati's books, Milani commanded his followers not to read misleading and deceptive books (*zalleh*). Two months later, Ayatollah Mohammad-Sadeq Rowhani issued a lengthy respondium. He cautioned that Shari'ati's speeches and writings had entered 'a dangerous stage' and had 'caused anger and hatred among the country's pious Muslims'. Proclaiming Shari'ati as a *muhareb*, or a rebel against Shi'ism, Islam and its laws Rowhani declared that attending Shari'ati's speeches was Islamically forbidden (*haram*).⁷¹ Five days after Rowhani's respondium, Ayatollah Hassan Tabataba'i-Qomi also ruled that Shari'ati's works were 'misleading and deceptive'. He too directed his followers not to read them.⁷²

While Shari'ati was in prison, Ayatollah Milani issued a second statement reiterating his previous position. In a *fatwa* dated 15 June 1974, Milani supported the opinion of those preachers who had prohibited the reading of Shari'ati's books.⁷³ The second wave of condemnations all surfaced within a few days after Shari'ati's release from prison. The surprising coincidence may be construed as a reflection of the clergy's displeasure at his release. Ayatollahs Abol-Hasan Qazvini, Mollammad-Hossein Tabataba'i and Kazem Mar'ashi ruled that Shari'ati's writings were incompatible with Islamic sources and Shi'ism, recommending that they should not be purchased or sold, or studied by the common people.⁷⁴

The last round of *fatwas* against Shari'ati came after his death. These should be viewed in the light of Motahhari's deep concern and anxiety about Shari'ati's fame and influence among the young, especially after his death. In a letter to Khomeini, Motahhari lamented that a large coalition of forces who, in his opinion, had 'deviationist tendencies', intended 'to make an idol of Shari'ati so that no clerical figure would dare to opine on his speeches.'⁷⁵ Less than four months after Shari'ati's death, on 9 October 1977, Ayatollah Ali-Fani Esfahani issued the first *fatwa* in which he prohibited the purchase, sale and reading of Shari'ati's works.⁷⁶ By July 1978, similar *fatwas* were issued by Ayatollahs Ali Namazi-Shahrudi, Abdullah Shirazi, Malek-Hosseini, Abol-Qassem Musavi-Kho'i, and Shahabeddin Mar'ashi-Najafi.⁷⁷ Even Ayatollah Mohammad-Kazem Shari'atmadari, who had never taken a firm stand against Shari'ati and was even favourably disposed towards him, was forced to disclaim the 'rumour' that he had approved of Shari'ati's writings, allowed Shari'ati's books to be sold at his seminary school and had sent a message of condolence after Shari'ati's death.⁷⁸ After Milani's first *fatwa* against him and Ershad, Shari'ati lashed out against the aged source of imitation who had been

'Zionism and its masters can win *fatwas* from certain ayatollahs as easily as one can kiss a slut.'⁷⁹

Ruhollah Khomeini, who was in Najaf at the time when the clergy rallied against Shari'ati, was approached on more than one occasion to condemn Shari'ati's writings. As both a religious and a political figure his *fatwa* would have been most important. According to Do'a'i, who was at Najaf with Khomeini, an envoy was sent from Iran to solicit Khomeini's view on Shari'ati's *Eslamshenasi* and Motahhari's book on the veil. This must have been in 1970. Having read the criticisms and having referred to the original text, Khomeini had responded that Shari'ati's works were not unIslamic. Khomeini, therefore, refused to align himself with those ayatollahs who had harshly condemned Shari'ati. According to Do'a'i, Khomeini had observed that, 'these people wish to incite me against Shari'ati and Motahhari.'⁸⁰ The same Morteza Asgari who was one of the signatories of the first infamous anti-Ershad and anti-Shari'ati documents, also solicited a *fatwa* from Khomeini. In November 1972, after the first wave of condemnations by the ayatollahs he sent a very detailed letter to Khomeini from Saudi Arabia in which he collected what he believed to be all the faulty, flawed and even atheistic sections of Shari'ati's writings. Asgari had naturally asked for Khomeini's juristic position on Shari'ati's works. Having read the cases carefully, Khomeini retorted that 'I studied the cases referred to, none of the reprobations or criticisms were valid.'⁸¹ Seemingly worried that Khomeini might write something in Shari'ati's favour, Farsi is said to have interjected that Khomeini's support of Shari'ati's writings might have adverse consequences. According to Farsi, Khomeini had responded that he was not about to approve Shari'ati's writings but that Shari'ati had many supporters and that he was doing a service.⁸²

Initially, during the Winter of 1971 and the Spring of 1972, Shari'ati tried to neutralize the clerical propoganda against himself and Ershad by explaining and presenting his position while exposing the inconsistencies and fallacies of the arguments of his opponents and the misinformation they were propogating. Ershad organized a number of open seminars in which Shari'ati, his father, Shabestari and Balaghi participated and responded to questions and criticisms of the public. The first of these was held on 10 December 1971. On a more private level, Shari'ati met with individuals and presented his view of the debate and the controversies. It was not unusual for him to be invited to the home of certain well-wishers who would also invite a few notables deeply influenced by the anti-Shari'ati propoganda. At these dinners, Shari'ati would present his own case. On one such occasion, Shari'ati spoke until 3 a.m. By the time he had finished, his contesters were in tears and apologizing for their misconceptions.⁸³ By the Summer of 1972, the rapid pace of events and the multitude of challenges to Shari'ati made it impossible for him to make a continuous effort to dispel the accusations made against him. As the only means available to him, Shari'ati used his regular lectures at Ershad to respond to his opponents.

and even mute, Islamic students and organizations overseas affiliated with outlawed political parties or organizations in Iran took a firm stand in support of Shari'ati. A month after the closure of Ershad, the monthly *Khabarnameh-e Jebhe-e Melli-ye Iran*, published by Abolhassan Bani-Sadr in Paris, printed an article entitled, 'The official religion'.⁸⁴ The author demonstrated how, in pursuit of attaining absolute control over the religious sphere, the Iranian government was using 'clerical imposters' (*rowhani-namayan*) to defeat the progressive clerics and silence religious intellectuals. It argued that such men were being put up to the task of slandering and vilifying those who had tried to liberate the revolutionary ideas of Islam from the rigid caste imposed upon it. The article maintained that Ali Shari'ati was the victim of such a ploy. Reporting the closure of Ershad and the confiscation of all Shari'ati's books from shops throughout the country, the author demanded that the clergy be 'cleansed' and 'clerical imposters' purged. The article reported how Mohammad Ali Ansari-Qomi, who was alleged to have collaborated with SAVAK, and Manaqebi, two of Shari'ati's detractors, were given a good beating by the people.

In its April–May 1973 issue, *Payam-e Mojahed*, the overseas monthly journal of Bazargan's Iran Freedom Movement published by Ebrahim Yazdi, printed 'an open letter of grievance'.⁸⁵ The letter, written by the Muslim Student Associations of Europe, US and Canada, was addressed to Iran's high-ranking clerics and sources of imitation. It warned against the danger of the *velayatis* and their campaign of defamation. Attacking the 'fat clerical imposters' who defamed Ershad as well as the Hedayat and al-Javad mosques, it asked 'the ulema' to speak up against these people. Alluding to Milani's *fatwa* against Shari'ati and Ershad, the letter expressed concern over the fact that, supported by the sources of imitation and in possession of their *fatwas*, the government had forbidden the patrons of Islam to write and lecture. The letter was dated some one and a half months after the closure of Ershad.

Mosaddeqist Criticism

Shari'ati was not only besieged by his clerical opponents. His activities at Ershad and his 'tolerated' socio-political role as a vocal protester in what was considered by some to be 'revolutionary conditions', gradually came to be viewed as questionable, if not dubious. Questions and queries, even from individuals and groups Shari'ati considered to be modernist and radical started to irritate him. When people he thought of as enlightened intellectuals who would understand and support his discourse and activities started to express their doubts, Shari'ati felt abandoned, as he had on many occasions in his life. At the time, he told his class that he had come to rely only on his own faith, his God and himself, never trusting others or depending on anyone's help.⁸⁶

bazaaris, with a long background of political activity, had been influenced by rumours about Ershad.⁸⁷ It was said that, behind the scenes, Ershad was prodded and supported by the establishment. Concern was also raised about the presence at Ershad of certain influential bazaar figures suspected of links with the security services. Members of this Mosaddeqist group had approached Sami informing him that they wished to see Shari'ati in private to caution him about the possibility that he was 'being abused and manipulated by the government'. Sami organized a meeting at his office. Nekuruh, who was present, recollected that most of those who attended this meeting were members of the Iranian Peoples' Party.⁸⁸ Shari'ati had been a member of this party during and shortly after 1952, but had later fallen out with it. Sami recalls that Shari'ati arrived late at night to what was virtually a tribunal in which he was being prosecuted for his conduct, his association with Ershad and the continuation of his activities.⁸⁹ The meeting lasted until dawn. Having listened to the concerns of those present, Shari'ati is said to have argued that either his cultural activities – preparing the ground for a cultural revolution – were counter-productive and deviationist, in which case he asked the group to correct him; or that, under the circumstances, he was on the right path, in which case he told them that he should be helped in his pursuits. Sami recalls that it was after this meeting that he himself began his close association with Ershad and participated in a number of panel discussions and conferences. On 12 January 1972, he delivered his first lecture at Ershad on the topic of 'Women in Islam'. The meeting between Shari'ati and the bazaar members of the Iranian Peoples' Party occurred in early January 1972.

The Chidings of the Revolutionaries

The widespread arrest, trial and execution of the members of what came to be known as the guerilla organizations of 'the Peoples' Mojahedin' and 'the Peoples' Fada'ian' further radicalized the intellectual and political environment in Iran. From the end of January 1972, military tribunals in Iran were busy pronouncing death sentences on those whom the regime considered to be 'terrorists' and 'saboteurs'. The 'freedom fighters' who faced the death squads or were killed in urban skirmishes were from both Muslim and Marxist revolutionary organizations. The Mojahedin were militant, revolutionary and Islamic guerillas. Even though their ideology was claimed to be based on Islam, their economic and social world outlook was basically an Islamically-coated variant of 'non-materialist Marxism'. Furthermore, they considered the social conditions in Iran ripe for revolutionary activities. At his trial Sa'id Mohsen had drawn a parallel between the task of the Mojahedin and that of Imam Hossein, the archetype of martyrs. On 1 February 1972, Ahmad Reza'i found himself surrounded by the security forces and committed revolutionary suicide by detonating a grenade. He was the Mojahedin's