

FROM QABIL AND HABIL TO IMAMATE: RECONSTRUCTING ALI SHARIATI'S VISION OF THE IDEAL ISLAMIC SOCIETY

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Abstract

The concept of an ideal society remains a central concern in intellectual discourse, including within Islamic thought across historical periods. Ali Shariati, a prominent twentieth-century Muslim thinker, offers a distinctive contribution by integrating Qur'anic narratives with a sociohistorical and dialectical analysis of society. This article examines Ali Shariati's interpretation of the Qabil-Habil narrative alongside his concepts of *ummah* and imamate to uncover the philosophical foundations of his vision of an ideal Islamic society. By framing the Qabil-Habil conflict as a symbolic expression of the tension between domination and justice, Ali Shariati constructs a historical paradigm that culminates in the *ummah* as a purposive and transformative community, guided by the imamate as a form of morally grounded and revolutionary leadership. However, this study also critically engages Ali Shariati's framework by highlighting its theoretical and practical limitations. His dualistic reading of history and his emphasis on charismatic, non-procedural leadership raise important questions regarding pluralism, inclusivity, accountability, and democratic legitimacy in contemporary contexts. Drawing on perspectives from modern Islamic thought and political theory, this article argues that Ali Shariati's concepts are

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best understood not as a fixed political blueprint, but as a normative horizon that can be reinterpreted within pluralistic and institutional settings. In doing so, the study situates Ali Shariati's thought within broader debates on Islamic political ethics, alternative modernities, and the role of religion in shaping just, inclusive, and transformative societies.

Keywords: Qabil, Habil; ummah; imamate; ideal society.

Khulasah

Konsep masyarakat ideal kekal sebagai tema utama dalam wacana intelektual, termasuk dalam pemikiran Islam merentasi pelbagai zaman. Ali Shariati, seorang pemikir Muslim abad ke-20 yang berpengaruh, menawarkan sumbangan tersendiri dengan menggabungkan naratif al-Qur'an dengan analisis sosiohistoris yang bersifat dialektik. Artikel ini meneliti tafsiran Ali Shariati terhadap naratif Qabil-Habil serta konsep ummah dan imamah bagi memahami asas falsafah visinya tentang masyarakat Islam yang ideal. Dengan mentafsir konflik Qabil-Habil sebagai simbol pertentangan antara dominasi dan keadilan, Ali Shariati membangunkan kerangka sejarah yang memuncak pada konsep *ummah* sebagai komuniti transformatif yang berorientasikan tujuan, dipandu oleh imamah sebagai bentuk kepimpinan yang berteraskan nilai moral dan semangat revolusioner. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian ini turut mengemukakan penilaian kritikal terhadap kerangka pemikiran Ali Shariati dengan menyoroti beberapa batasan teoretis dan praktikal. Pendekatan dualistik beliau terhadap sejarah serta penekanannya terhadap kepimpinan karismatik yang tidak berasaskan prosedur menimbulkan persoalan berkaitan pluralisme, inklusiviti, akauntabiliti, dan legitimasi demokrasi dalam konteks semasa. Dengan merujuk kepada pemikiran Islam moden dan teori politik kontemporari, artikel ini berhujah bahawa gagasan Ali Shariati lebih sesuai difahami sebagai suatu horizon normatif berbanding pelan politik yang bersifat tetap. Oleh itu, konsep ummah

dan imamah boleh ditafsir semula dalam kerangka yang lebih pluralistik dan berinstitusi, sekali gus meletakkan pemikiran Shariati dalam perbincangan yang lebih luas mengenai etika politik Islam, alternatif kepada moderniti, serta peranan agama dalam membentuk masyarakat yang adil, inklusif dan transformatif.

Kata kunci: Qabil; Habil; ummah; imamah; masyarakat ideal.

Introduction

The concept of an ideal society has long been a central theme in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions, including Islamic thought, from antiquity to the modern era.¹ The intellectual discourse on the ideal society began with Greek philosophy and has evolved throughout the centuries. Plato, in his *Republic*, has put forward the concept of heaven on earth as the source of happiness for the people of the world. As for Muslim philosophers such as al-Farabi, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, and Ibn Khaldun, the attainment of happiness and perfection is the goal of human beings gathered in a single community. This goal, according to al-Farabi, cannot be achieved by individuals living alone without cooperating with others. Happiness and perfection, both in this world and in the hereafter, are impossible to achieve if he is not in a group, association, and cooperation with others in goodness and virtue. Humans are social creatures. Therefore, this perfection can be achieved when they live together.²

¹ Humaidi, "To Be Excellent Society: Comparative Analysis between Western and Muslim Philosophers," *Ulumuna* 20(1) (2016), 149; Donald H. Bishop, "Human Dignity and Ideal Society," *World Futures* 10(3-4) (1971), 305-16; Robin Weiss, "Stoic Utopia: The Use of Friendship in Creating the Ideal Society," *Apeiron* 49(2) (2016), 193-228.

² Adulla A. Bukier, "Utopian Literature of the Ideal Society: A Study in Al-Farabi's Virtuous City & More's Utopia," *Majallah al-Andalus Li al-'Ulūm al-Insāniyyah wa al-Ijtīmā'iyyah* 18(5) (2018), 5-40; Abū Naṣr al-Farabi, *Kitāb Arā' Ahl al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1985), 45; Hayatullah Laluddin, "Conception of Society and

Historically, thoughts and studies regarding the concept of an ideal society in Islam have significantly contributed to the development of Islamic civilization. From the early period of Islam and classical Islamic culture to the golden age of Islamic civilization in Andalusia and the Middle East, the concept of an ideal society in Islam has become the basis for the formation of successful social, legal, economic, and political systems. However, in the current context, Muslim communities around the world face various challenges that affect their efforts to achieve an ideal society.³ Globalization, modernization, political conflicts, economics, and other social issues influence Muslim communities' social order and values. Therefore, conducting an in-depth review of the existing scientific literature is important to understand the concept of an ideal society in Islamic thought and its relevance in the current social context.⁴

One of the modern Muslim thinkers who focused extensively on this issue is Ali Shariati (1933–1977), who is often regarded as one of the most influential Iranian thinkers of the twentieth century. Although numerous studies have examined his life and ideas, only a few have systematically explored his philosophical framework, particularly his vision of an ideal society. Scholars generally portray Ali Shariati from three main perspectives: as a sociologist concerned with the dialectical relationship between ideas and social practice, as a reformist adherent of Shi'ite Islam, and as a powerful

Its Characteristics from an Islamic Perspective," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 6(1) (2014), 12–25.

³ Mehdi Parvizi Aminah, "The Challenges of Modernity: The Case of Political Islam," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 6(1–3) (2007), 215–28; Wael B. Hallaq, "Maqasid and the Challenges of Modernity," *al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 49(1) (2011), 1–31.

⁴ Abur Hamdi Usman et al., "The Concept of an Ideal Society: A Review of Fazlur Rahman's Perspective," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 6(1) (2022), 1–12.

and influential orator. For instance, Shahrough Akhavi examined Ali Shariati through the lens of revolutionary ideology and his role in the Iranian revolution. Similarly, Ali Rahnama, in his book *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*, provides a comprehensive discussion of Ali Shariati's life and intellectual development, together with the cultural, social, and political contexts that shaped his thought.⁵ However, this book is a character biography, so Rahnama does not elaborate on Ali Shariati's thoughts in depth.

Among the few who examine Ali Shariati's philosophical thought system, Yudian Wahyudi examines Ali Shariati's thoughts on free will by comparing them with Bint Shati's thoughts.⁶ Then there is Elisheva Machlis,⁷ who reviews Ali Shariati's *tawhīd* worldview and places his writings in the broader context of Western and Muslim thought. Ramadhan also tries to review Ali Shariati's theological reflections on humanity. He concludes that Ali Shariati's theology liberates humans from the confines of harmful fatalism.⁸ The themes of humanity, of course, are very thick in it. This is the antithesis of *kalām*'s traditionalism, which is more of a 'theomorphism' pattern. There is also Taufik & Taufik, which examines Shariati's monotheistic thought in the context of criticism of modern Western humanism.⁹

⁵ Ali Rahnama, *Ali Shariati: Biografi Politik Intelektual Revolusioner* (Jakarta: Penerbit Erlangga, 2002), 1.

⁶ Yudian Wahyudi, "Ali Shari'ati and Bint al-Shāṭi' on Free Will: A Comparison," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 9(1) (1998), 35–45.

⁷ Elisheva Machlis, "'Alī Shari'atī and the Notion of Tawhīd: Re-Exploring the Question of God's Unity," *Die Welt des Islams* 54(2) (2014), 183–211.

⁸ M. Ramadhan, "Teologi Kemanusiaan: Studi atas Pemikiran Ali Syariati," *Jurnal Theologia* 22(2) (2011), 1–11.

⁹ Zulfan Taufik & Muhammad Taufik, "Tawhīd and the Criticism of Modern Humanism: Reflection on 'Alī Shari'atī's Thought," *Ulul Albab: Jurnal Studi Islam* 24(2) (2023), 283–304.

Adding further depth to these discussions, Hamid Dabashi situates Ali Shariati within a broader trajectory of Islamic liberation theology. Dabashi interprets Ali Shariati's thought as a powerful synthesis of Islamic metaphysics, Marxist analysis, and existentialist concerns, aimed at dismantling both colonial oppression and clerical authoritarianism.¹⁰ However, Hamid Dabashi primarily focuses on ideological and political dimensions, giving limited attention to the systematic formulation of Ali Shariati's social philosophy. Likewise, Farhang Rajaei, in *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran*, and in his editorial work on *What Is to Be Done?* highlights Ali Shariati's intellectual activism and his attempt to reconcile Islam with modernity. Nevertheless, Rajaei also does not provide a comprehensive philosophical reconstruction of Ali Shariati's conceptual framework for an ideal Islamic society.¹¹

As a complement to the aforementioned studies, this article aims to critically examine the philosophical foundations and principal concepts underlying Ali Shariati's vision of an ideal Islamic society. By exploring his socio-historical dialectic-symbolized by the primordial conflict between Qabil and Habil, as well as his conceptualization of *ummah* and imamate, this study seeks to reconstruct Ali Shariati's vision of a just, dynamic, and liberated Muslim society. Through this analysis, Ali Shariati is positioned not merely as a revolutionary figure but also as a systematic Islamic thinker whose ideas warrant deeper philosophical and hermeneutical engagement. Ultimately, this study aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on Islamic political philosophy while offering normative insights for

¹⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 102–147.

¹¹ Farhang Rajaei, *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 85–90.

Muslim individuals, communities, and leaders striving to establish a more ethical, harmonious, and value-based society grounded in Islamic principles.

This approach incorporates several key components, including the conceptual analysis of central notions such as *ummah*, *imāmah*, *tawhīd*, and human liberation; the contextualization of these concepts within both classical Islamic thought and contemporary socio-political realities; and a critical examination of the metaphysical and ethical assumptions underlying Ali Shariati's writings.¹²

As a philosophical inquiry, this study requires deep textual engagement, clarity of reasoning, and articulation of normative implications.¹³ It also draws selectively on contemporary theories of liberation theology and utopian thought to highlight Ali Shariati's unique contribution to modern Islamic political philosophy. This combined framework enables a deeper understanding of how Ali Shariati reinterprets Islamic concepts to envision a transformative and justice-oriented Muslim society.

Early Life and Socio-Intellectual Background of Ali Shariati

Ali Shariati was one of the most influential Iranian thinkers of the twentieth century. He was born in the village of Mazinan, in Iran, into a religious and intellectually active family. Ali Shariati's ideas are distinguished not only by their intellectual depth but also by their profound practical and social impact. In this regard, his influence is often compared to that of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/1839–1897) and the Egyptian writer and activist Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966).¹⁴

¹² Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 40–45.

¹³ Rob Fisher, "Philosophical Approaches," in *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Peter Connolly (London & New York: Continuum, 1999), 105–127.

¹⁴ Shahrough Akhavi, "Shariati, Ali," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Rahnama, *Ali Shariati*, 574.

Ali Shariati's life included a susceptible period of change, during which the Pahlavi Dynasty was making deliberate efforts to push Iran from its perceived traditional status to a modern, Western-style state.¹⁵ His life reflects the tensions of a culturally rich and historically old society confronted by the changing tides of time. The genuine need for modernity and the struggle to protect Islam for Iranians is contradictory. Modernity has a Western face, is change-oriented, and is anti-traditional. At the same time, Islam is the formal foundation of the traditional values of an established society, a cultural heritage widely regarded as reliable. For most intellectuals, Islam and modernity represent an exchange. The choice to move toward modernity, economically, politically and ideologically, is created by itself only after modernity is lived at the expense of eliminating religion.¹⁶

From an academic perspective, Ali Shariati earned his doctoral degree from the Sorbonne University in Paris. Outside his formal lectures, Ali Shariati met many people who influenced his perception of life and his worldview on militants, philosophers, academics, artists, broadcasters, musicians and even shopkeepers. He attends their lectures, observes their art, listens to their music, sometimes discusses with them, and analyzes their different teachings and messages. From each of them, Ali Shariati got something and then admitted to being indebted to them.¹⁷ However, what is most important about Ali Shariati's intellectual process is that neither his study of the works and ideas of certain thinkers in Paris nor his encounters with them passively influenced him; rather, they stimulated him to develop new

¹⁵ Rahnema, *Ali Shariati*, 1.

¹⁶ Charles Kurzman, "Historiography of the Iranian Revolutionary Movement, 1977-79," *Iranian Studies* 28(1-2) (1995), 25-38; Nikki R. Keddie, "Iran: Change in Islam; Islam and Change," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11(4) (1980), 527-542.

¹⁷ Hamid Algar, *The Roots of the Iranian Revolution* (Ontario: The Open Press, 1983), 74.

and original ideas. Tawassuli underlined the vital process of Ali Shariati's study in Paris, namely his attention not only to lessons, memorization, and exam preparation, as with other students, but also to developing himself into a conscious and mindful martyr.¹⁸

Ali Shariati's sociocultural, sociopolitical, and academic background has influenced and enabled him to build himself as a critical, productive, and wealthy thinker, as well as an intellectual who cannot keep quiet about the events around him. Ali Shariati's method of thinking plays a vital role in his discourse. He has a binary vision of analyzing all topics in the Manichaeic philosophical tradition. According to Rahnama, Ali Shariati is a natural dialectical expert. His analysis of the dichotomy within the individual, society, history, religion, and Shi'ism is the result of his methodological application. He is a master of blending and is himself a man of synthesis.¹⁹ A significant class eclectic, part himself Muslim, part Christian, part Buddhist, part Mazdaki, part Sufi, part heretical, part Marxist, part existentialist, part humanist, and part sceptic. So, it is not surprising that Ali Shariati was able, in the same breath, to mention Imām Ali, Imām Husayn, and Abu Dharr, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx in analyzing a theme.²⁰

Qabil and Habil as Symbols of Islamic Sociohistorical Dialectics in Shariati's Thought

An ideal society is a desired goal in various human life systems, including in the Islamic context. The concept of an

¹⁸ Ghulam Abbas Tawassuli, "Introduction: A Bibliographical Sketch," in *On the Sociology of Islam*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979), 24.

¹⁹ Rahnama, *Ali Shariati*, 573.

²⁰ Azyumardi Azra, "Akar-Akar Ideologi Revolusi Iran: Filsafat Pergerakan Ali Shariati," in *Melawan Hegemoni Barat: Ali Shariati Dalam Sorotan Cendekiawan Indonesia*, ed. M. Deden Ridwan (Jakarta: Penerbit Lentera, 1999), 49; Machlis, "'Alī Sharī'atī and the Notion of Tawḥīd," 187–188.

ideal society in Islam has deep roots in the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith and has been interpreted by Muslim scholars for centuries. Ali Shariati's thoughts on the concept of an ideal society are rooted in a sociohistorical debate that stems from the conflict between Qabil and Habil, in contrast to the philosophy of human creation, which originates from the story of Adam. From the story of Qabil and Habil, Ali Shariati views history as a continuous stream of events. As humans, there is a dialectical contradiction: a constant struggle between two opposing elements that started from human affairs. He argues that the battle takes place in all places and at all times, and the total of it is history. So, in Ali Shariati's definition, history is the dialectical movement of humankind over time.²¹

In the story, Qabil and Habil are portrayed as the sons of Adam who became involved in a conflict over irreconcilable differences. In interpreting this narrative, Ali Shariati draws upon the Qur'anic account in Surah al-Ma'idah, in which "Still, the other convinced himself to kill his own brother, so he killed him, becoming a loser. Then Allah sent a crow digging "a grave" in the ground "for a dead crow", in order to show him how to bury the corpse of his brother. He cried, "Alas! Have I "even" failed to be like this crow and bury the corpse of my brother?" So, he became regretful". At the same time, Ali Shariati develops a broader sociological interpretation of human conflict and social struggle, despite the fact that the Qur'an itself does not explicitly mention the names Qabil and Habil.²² But also, on the narrations that try to decipher the expressions of the Qur'an.²³ For Ali Shariati, this story serves as an important

²¹ Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), 97.

²² Surah al-Ma'idah 5: 30-31.

²³ Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabari, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* (Beirut: Dār Ṣadīr, 2003), 1:44-47; Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad al-Naysabūrī al-Tha'labī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā': al-Musammā 'Arā'is al-Majālis* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, t.t.), 53-58.

source of inspiration for understanding the philosophy of history and the development of human civilization. The conflict between Qabil and Habil represents the struggle between two opposing forces that repeatedly emerge throughout the history of dialectics. Through a symbolic mode of interpretation, Ali Shariati argues that Qabil symbolizes the agricultural system, whereas Habil represents the pastoral or herding system. He derives this interpretation from the occupational backgrounds of both figures in the narrative. When Adam instructed his sons to offer sacrifices to Allah in order to resolve their dispute, Qabil presented the remnants of his inferior and damaged crops, while Habil offered a young camel from among his best and most beloved possessions.

Based on these types of sacrifices, Ali Shariati said that nature was the source of all production in the age of herding, which was also the age of fishing and hunting. There is no monopolistic or individual ownership of the sources of production or the means of production. Everything is available equally for everyone. The spirit and norms of society, respect for parents, sincerity in carrying out moral obligations, religious obedience and sincerity, love and patience, among others, are human characteristics in this production system, symbolized as Habil. However, once humans became acquainted with agriculture, society's life and its entire structure underwent a profound revolution. For Ali Shariati, this phenomenon is the biggest revolution in history. This revolution has given birth to a new man who is all-powerful, vile, fostering an era of civilization and discrimination, symbolized as Qabil.²⁴

Ali Shariati's sociohistorical dialectic presupposes the existence of two possible structures in all human societies. He criticized the views of Karl Marx (1818-1883), who divided the social structure into primitive socialism, slavery, servitude, feudalism, the bourgeoisie, and capitalism.

²⁴ Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 99.

According to Ali Shariati, slavery, servitude, the bourgeoisie, feudalism, and capitalism are not social structures but are part of the "superstructure of society." For him, there are only two structures. In the first structure, the community becomes the determinant of its destiny, and all its citizens do good deeds for the community and the benefit of the community. Whereas in the second structure, the owner and determinant of fate are in each individual's hands, both for themselves and the community. However, there are various modes of production within each of these structures, as well as forms of relations, tools, sources, and goods. All of this constitutes a 'superstructure'.²⁵

Based on the two structures above, Ali Shariati then divides society into two poles: the Qabil and the Habil. Throughout history, the two classes (Qabil and Habil) were in opposition to and confronted each other. The Qabil pole represents the ruling structure consisting of three aspects: king, owner, and aristocracy. In primitive times, all three elements of this structure were represented by one individual as a single force. In other words, an individual accommodates three aspects. That individual, as in history, is Qabil. Along with the development of the evolution of social systems, both civilization and culture, and the pace of the dimensions of social life, these three aspects increasingly require three different dimensions that are seen in three different aspects. Politics is a manifestation of the king, wealth is a manifestation of the owner, and an ascetic religious life is a manifestation of the aristocracy.²⁶ In the Qur'an, Pharaoh is a symbol of political power, Qarun is a symbol of economic power, while Bal'am is a symbol of aristocracy and clergy. All three are manifestations of the same trinity of Qabil. These three manifestations in the Qur'an are referred to as *mala'* (greedy and cruel), *mutraf* (greedy and full of filling),

²⁵ Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 111–12.

²⁶ Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 115.

and *rāhib* (official priests). Ali Shariati said the three were always trying to dominate, blackmail, and trick the people.

Meanwhile, on the other hand, Habil's pole is the structure that is ruled, they are the people's class (*al-nās*), which is the opposite of the trinity (king, owner, aristocracy). According to Shariati, God sided with the people's class (*al-nās*) because whenever the Qur'an touched on social issues, the word (*lafẓ*) of Allah always became synonymous with and grew alongside *al-nās*. The two expressions are often interchangeable and have meaning. An example is the word of Allah, meaning: "If you lend something (wealth) to 'Allah' with a good loan..."²⁷ The word Allah in this verse, explained Ali Shariati, means *al-nās* (people) because, in this case, Allah, as God, does not need loans from His creatures.²⁸ So, from the description above, it can be concluded that in Ali Shariati's perspective, Habil's pattern is an ideal image of the life order of society that is approved by God. A social system based on human equality, brotherhood, justice, and the ownership of rights by the people as the basis.

Ali Shariati's interpretation of the Qabil and Habil narrative presents a compelling sociohistorical allegory for the emergence of a class-based society. He symbolically associates Qabil with settled agriculture, private ownership, and the rise of hierarchical, oppressive social structures, while Habil is linked to nomadic herding, communal living, and egalitarian ethics. This binary opposition serves as a foundational myth in Ali Shariati's critique of domination and his vision for a just Islamic society. However, this symbolic dualism, while rhetorically powerful, warrants critical re-examination. Human history exhibits a much more complex spectrum of socio-economic formations, including hybrid societies that combined pastoralism and agriculture,

²⁷ Surah al-Taghabun 64:17, "If you lend something (wealth) to 'Allah' with a good loan, He will multiply it for you and forgive you. For Allah is Most Appreciative, Most Forbearing."

²⁸ Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 117–18.

often evolving adaptive and cooperative mechanisms not easily captured by a binary model.

For instance, archaeological and anthropological research has uncovered agro-pastoral communities in Central Asia, the Fertile Crescent, and sub-Saharan Africa that maintained relatively decentralized and egalitarian structures while engaging in both farming and herding. These examples problematize Ali Shariati's deterministic reading of agrarianism as the sole origin of inequality. James C. Scott, in *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017), argues that the rise of agrarian states was neither inevitable nor uniformly hierarchical; early sedentary communities often resisted state control and experimented with non-coercive forms of social organization.²⁹ Similarly, Jared Diamond, in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997), underscores that while agrarian systems did contribute to stratification, they also facilitated technological innovation, population growth and increased food security developments that cannot be dismissed outright as signs of social regression.³⁰

A synthesized reading of Ali Shariati alongside these critiques suggests that while his mythic narrative remains powerful as a moral and ideological critique of oppression, it risks obscuring the plurality of historical trajectories. Ali Shariati's framing effectively mobilizes Islamic symbols for social justice, but a more nuanced hermeneutic approach, one that accounts for empirical historical data and non-linear development, can enrich his analysis. Rather than seeing Qabil and Habil as static archetypes of evil and virtue, they might be reinterpreted as dialectical forces whose interaction shaped diverse patterns of human civilization beyond binary logics. Such an approach invites contemporary Muslim

²⁹ James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 1–2, 180–185.

³⁰ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 112–116.

thinkers to engage more dynamically with history, not merely as a source of cautionary myths, but as a field of ethical experimentation and socio-economic pluralism.

Additionally, Ali Shariati's conceptualization of the "Habil society" as an ideal model of equality and justice prompts deeper interrogation regarding its feasibility within the structures of globalized, capitalist modernity. While Ali Shariati portrays the Habil archetype as emblematic of moral integrity, communal solidarity, and spiritual economy in contrast to Qabil's exploitative and hierarchical agrarian legacy, one might question whether such an idealized socio-ethical framework can function pragmatically in the contemporary world.

Anthony Giddens, in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), underscores how late modernity is marked by disembedding mechanisms and institutional differentiation, which render premodern communal arrangements, like those implied by Ali Shariati's Habil society, difficult to maintain without adaptation.³¹ Nevertheless, the notion of a modern "Habibian" society is not necessarily utopian. Instead, it can be reimagined through the lens of alternative,³² in which Islamic values and moral economies serve as the ethical substratum for developing plural and just modern societies that diverge from Western capitalist trajectories.

In this context, Mehmet Asutay introduces the concept of the Islamic moral economy as a viable systemic alternative rooted in equity, redistribution, and ethical finance.³³ Similarly, Islamic microfinance and cooperative economic models have been developed as grounded expressions of

³¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 20–27.

³² Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Multiple Modernities* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–2; Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), 1–5.

³³ Mehmet Asutay, "A Political Economy Approach to Islamic Economics: Systemic Understanding for an Alternative Economic System," *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies* 1(2) (2007), 3–18. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1735619>.

socio-economic justice, resonating with Ali Shariati's Habilian ethic.³⁴ These practical movements suggest that the spiritual and moral priorities embedded in the Habil narrative can indeed inspire viable frameworks of community-based solidarity and participatory economics.

Furthermore, contemporary Islamic liberation theology, as articulated by scholars such as Farid Esack,³⁵ Tariq Ramadan,³⁶ and Hasan Hassan Hanafi,³⁷ extends Ali Shariati's legacy by combining theological ethics with structural critiques of power and oppression. These thinkers affirm that premodern prophetic ethics can inform liberatory praxis in pluralistic societies, advancing the ideal of a spiritually grounded, socially just *ummah* in the modern era. Therefore, rather than dismissing the Habil society as anachronistic, it should be seen as a normative horizon that can inform alternative socio-political and economic configurations in our time.

Ummah and Imamah Revolutionary Leadership and Collective Transformation

As a result of the sociohistorical dialectic, Ali Shariati developed the concept of an ideal society, which he dubbed the *ummah*. For Shi'ites, the *ummah* and imamate are Islam's most fundamental and well-known principles. On the other hand, it is a perplexing topic. This is because most

³⁴Mohammed Obaidullah, *Introduction to Islamic Microfinance* (New Delhi: IBF Net Limited, 2008), 5.

³⁵ Farid Esack, *Qur'ān, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Inter-Religious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 1997), 83, 102; Fathin Fauhatun, "Farid Esack's Hermeneutics and the Contextualization of Religious Texts: A Response to Social Inequality." *Islamic Thought Review* 3(1) (2025), 31–43.

³⁶ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63, 148.

³⁷ Muhammad Adress Prawira Negara & Neng Hannah, "Liberation Theology of Leftist Islam in the Thought of Hassan Hanafi and Its Contextualization." *Islamic Thought Review* 1(1) (2023), 1–12.

researchers, past and present, have discussed it exclusively in theological and philosophical terms.³⁸³⁹ Indeed, Ali Shariati asserts that the study of the *ummah* and imamate is critical to human life. As a result, the sociological side is no less vital to research due to its greater effectiveness and dynamic nature.⁴⁰

The term *ummah* has a root word from *amma*, meaning intention (*qaṣad*) and intent ('*azim*).⁴¹ In the Qur'an, the term *ummah* appears 64 times across 24 verses. In that frequency, *ummah* contains several meanings, for example, nation, community, religion or religious community, time or term, and leader or a synonym for *imām*.⁴² Ali Shariati captures four substances in the *ummah*: effort, movement, progress, and purpose. In addition to these four meanings, the term *ummah* principally means a clear path. That is, a group of people who headed a specific way. In detail, the term *ummah* contains three concepts: togetherness in direction and purpose, the movement towards these directions and goals,

³⁸ Idil Akbar, "Khilafah Islamiyah: Antara Konsep dan Realitas Kenegaraan (Republik Islam Iran dan Kerajaan Islam Arab Saudi)," *Journal of Government and Civil Society* 1(1) (2018), 95–109; Abd Aziz, "Imamah Dalam Pemikiran Politik Syi'ah," *Humanistika: Jurnal Keislaman* 6(2) (2020), 124–138; Muhammad Rizky Silaban, "Ulil Abshar Abdalla's Criticism of the Caliphate Concept of Hizbut Tahrir in Indonesia," *Islamic Thought Review* 1(1) (2023), 33–42; Zulfadli Zulfadli, "Orientasi Politik Aktivistis Eks Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia Pasca Dibubarkan," *Kontekstualita* 33(2) (2018), 169–189.

³⁹ Abd Aziz, "Imamah dalam Pemikiran Politik Syi'ah," 124–138; Idil Akbar, "Khilafah Islamiyah: Antara Konsep dan Realitas Kenegaraan (Republik Islam Iran dan Kerajaan Islam Arab Saudi), 95–109; Kamaluddin Nurdin Marjuni, "Kriteria Pemimpin Berdasarkan Kepimpinan Kenabian: Analisis Terhadap Kepimpinan Rasulullah SAW," *Transformasi: Jurnal Kepemimpinan dan Pendidikan Islam* 3(1) (2019), 58–72.

⁴⁰ Ali Shariati, *Ummah dan Imamah: Suatu Tinjauan Sosiologis* (Bandung: Pustaka Hidayah, 1995), 19.

⁴¹ Muḥammad bin Mukarram Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 212.

⁴² M. Dawam Rahardjo, *Ensiklopedi al-Qur'an: Tafsir Sosial Berdasarkan Konsep-Konsep Kunci* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1996), 482.

and the necessity of a collective leader and guidance. Based on the above meaning, imamate reflects the instructions given to the *ummah* that lead them to their destination. In other words, a group of people who have the same goal and work together to move towards the goals they aspire to, based on collective leadership.⁴³ Hence, Ali Shariati said that it is impossible to have an *ummah* without an imamate.

The basic framework of the *ummah* is economics. The social system is based on equality, justice, and property rights placed in the people's hands, on the revival of the "Habil system." The *ummah's* political philosophy and form of government is not a democracy with reckoning, not liberalism without responsibility and direction, not a game of opposing social forces, not a rotten aristocracy, not an anti-people dictatorship, and not an oligarchy. But it consists of "holy leadership" (not the leader, because it will lead to fascism), a committed and revolutionary leadership responsible for realizing the sacred nature of humans according to the plan of events. This is what Ali Shariati considers true imamate.⁴⁴

In the context of imamate, two issues became the focus of Ali Shariati's discussion. First, the ordinances and forms of the priesthood. Second, the procedure for selecting the leader of the *ummah* or the so-called *imām*. Like the term *ummah*, the term imamate manifests itself in the form of a perfect attitude, where a person is chosen as a stabilizing and dynamic force for the masses. The first means controlling the masses so that they are stable, then protecting them from threats, disease, and danger. The latter relates to the principle of progress and ideological, social, and belief change and leads the masses and their thoughts to an ideal form. Ali Shariati views the *ummah* and the imamate in dynamic conditions, which are constantly moving towards change for the sake of common goals. He views the most critical

⁴³ Shariati, *Ummah dan Imamah*, 50 & 52.

⁴⁴ Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 119–120.

responsibility of imamate as the realization and enforcement of the principles of government on the principles of progress, change, and transformation in its fastest form, then accelerates and leads the *ummah* towards perfection until the loss of ambition as an individual towards tranquillity and comfort.⁴⁵

Like the concept of human beings who are constantly moving in the process of becoming perfect, the *ummah*, in Ali Shariati's opinion, is a group that lives in a continuous transformation towards the attainment of absolute perfection and a relentless journey to create the highest values. With this definition of the *ummah*, Ali Shariati said that imamate is not an institution whose members enjoy established comfort and happiness, nor is it an institution that escapes leadership and responsibility for the welfare of the people and is not a form of life without purpose. For this reason, the task of the *imām* in Ali Shariati's eyes is not only limited to leading people in one aspect of politics, society, or the economy. Also, not limited to certain times in his position as commander, emir, or caliph, his task is to convey to humanity, covering all aspects of humanity in all its forms. An *imām* in this framework is limited to his lifetime, yet present at all times and living forever. However, Ali Shariati reminded us that *imāms* are not superhumans but ordinary people with many advantages over other humans or superhumans.⁴⁶

The critical question that arises then is whether the *imām* was chosen or based on the appointment of the Prophet or the previous *imām*. For Ali Shariati, imamate is a fundamental right that arises from a person. The source is from the *imām* himself, not external factors, such as appointment or election. In other words, imamate is not obtained through election but through proving one's abilities. This means that society, the source of sovereignty in a democratic system, is not tied to the priest through government bonds but is based on the people's bond with the

⁴⁵ Shariati, *Ummah Dan Imamah*, 63–64.

⁴⁶ Shariati, *Ummah Dan Imamah*, 114 & 129.

existing reality. They did not appoint him as an *imām* but acknowledged his worthiness to be an *imām*. If Ali Shariati's interpretation is applied, the question then arises as to whether there is a separation of roles between the *imām* (who is acknowledged) and the caliph (who is chosen). Ali Shariati rejects this distinction if it leads to the separation of religion from the state. However, this does not mean that the caliphate is always identical with the imamate.

In his view, imamate is confined to specific individuals, similar to the concept of *nubuwwah*, whereas the caliphate is not restricted to particular times, systems, or persons. The key distinction emphasized by Ali Shariati is that the caliphate represents a continuous historical responsibility, whereas the imamate is limited in terms of both time and person. Despite these differences, both concepts are ultimately directed toward a single goal, namely, leadership and governance grounded in responsibility, where a ruler is not necessarily always an *imām*.

Ali Shariati's understanding can be understood if we look further into his explanation of the procedure for selecting an *imām*. It is common knowledge that the Shi'ites reject *bai'ah* (democracy) and adhere to a will, while the Sunnis do the opposite. Nevertheless, for Ali Shariati, the two principles are not contradictory, nor are they heretical and un-Islamic. For Ali Shariati, the will is a political philosophy for a particular stage of the revolution, aimed at continuing the social message of the bearers of the revival of thought and society. It is a revolutionary principle in the imamate system, which functions with the excellent treatise on the leaders of the social revolution for several generations until the time comes when people can stand on their own feet (democracy). The *ummah* must carry out this will and leave their problems to the *waṣī* (the person who was given the will). Moreover, if they do not, they will be lost. After the end of the will stage, only then begins the democratic stage, which is a continuous

and unlimited traditional form of leading the community.⁴⁷ Therefore, the Shi'ite *imāms* or the messengers of Allah, numbering twelve *imāms*, are no more.⁴⁸

Ali Shariati's political system, divided into two stages, gives him a window through which he can exonerate himself from the 'errors' of praising democratic elections and denying Imām Ali the right to become the first caliph. Ali Shariati emphasized that during the transitional period of revolution, which he considered to have started after the Prophet's death, society should be ruled based on a 'guided democracy' and led by an *imām* who had become a perfect human being, an ideal role model. If the companions of the Prophet accepted Imām Ali, as the Prophet wished, as the first caliph, then after a few generations, society would be ready for a democracy based on *shūrā* (democracy). Only the Prophet knew who it was, so he announced Ali as his successor. Thus, Ali Shariati concludes that will or succession is merely a certain transitional and revolutionary philosophy.

By claiming that succession and democracy are both Islamic, Ali Shariati asserts that democracy is an ideal and aspired system of government. However, it will be disastrous if democracy is practiced at the wrong historical time. Such was the case of the election of Abu Bakr, which led to the rejection of the true revolutionary leader, Ali. Ali Shariati presupposes that if the will in the leadership of the *ummah* as a substitute for the caliph is not damaged, there is no doubt that the occultation of the last *imām* will not occur. The last *wāṣī* will live (present) as his predecessors so that the task of leadership will continue until the end of his will.⁴⁹

Ali Shariati highlighted the event of Saqifah Bani Sa'idah after the death of the Prophet, which, in his view,

⁴⁷ Shariati, *Ummah Dan Imamah*, 203.

⁴⁸ W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Political Thought: The Basic Concepts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), 111.

⁴⁹ Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Shi'a*, trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Manila: Al-Hidaya, 1995), 210–214.

redirected the course of Islamic history onto a different trajectory. According to him, had the Saqifah event occurred in 250 AH rather than 11 AH, Islamic history would have taken a very different form. Nevertheless, historical reality unfolded otherwise, as Muslims established a system of governance based on consultation and collective deliberation, even though, at that early stage, the political conditions were still closer to a framework of designated succession.

For Ali Shariati, this early shift contributed to the weakening of democracy in its formative stage, leading to the decline of consultative governance over time. He argues that democracy in its early form was not sufficiently developed and, in this sense, became vulnerable to its own contradictions. As a result, historical development moved along a trajectory that, in his interpretation, diverged from the original Islamic ideal, eventually giving rise to a hereditary form of caliphate. He further notes that the period of imamate came to an end after approximately two and a half centuries, transitioning from an era of struggle and martyrdom into an era of occultation. In this framework, the concept of *wasīyyah* (designation or testamentary succession) is understood as a foundational principle that is meant to operate alongside and be complemented by consultation (*shūrā*). The will must be carried out practically after the death of the Prophet, and his treatise on building the people must be continued.⁵⁰

Ali Shariati's articulation of the *ummah* and imamate offers a unique framework for envisioning an ideal Islamic society. However, his conceptualization raises critical questions, particularly when juxtaposed with contemporary interpretations of leadership and governance. While Ali Shariati's notion of the *ummah* emphasizes collective movement toward justice and equality, it assumes an inherent alignment of goals within the community, a premise that

⁵⁰ Shariati, *Ummah Dan Imamah*, 205.

overlooks the diversity of political, cultural, and ideological perspectives in modern societies. Scholars such as Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im have critiqued the prescriptive nature of such frameworks, arguing that they risk marginalizing pluralism in favor of an idealized vision of unity.⁵¹

Moreover, Ali Shariati's differentiation between imamate and caliphate reflects his effort to reconcile theological principles with sociopolitical realities. By positioning the imamate as a leadership model rooted in moral and spiritual guidance, Ali Shariati highlights its dynamic, transformative role. However, critics like Hamid Dabashi contend that this distinction, while innovative, lacks practical clarity in addressing the complexities of governance in pluralistic settings.⁵² The idea that the imamate evolves through recognition of inherent merit rather than democratic election also sparks debates about its compatibility with contemporary political ethics, particularly the principles of accountability and representation.

Abdolkarim Soroush adds another layer of critique by interrogating the epistemological underpinnings of religious authority in Ali Shariati's framework. While Shariati romanticizes the revolutionary potential of imamate, Soroush emphasizes the fallibility of interpretation and the necessity of separating religious truth claims from political legitimacy. In a pluralist society, argues Soroush, any sacralized leadership model must undergo rational scrutiny and be subject to democratic accountability to prevent the monopolization of moral authority.⁵³ These critiques underscore that while Ali Shariati's vision is inspiring, its practical application must be revisited through the lens of contemporary democratic theory and ethical pluralism. Tariq

⁵¹ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 114.

⁵² Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 117–118.

⁵³ 'Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*, trans. & ed. Mahmoud Sadri & Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 29.

Ramadan also argues that retrospective critiques like Ali Shariati's often simplify the intricate socio-political dynamics of early Islamic governance and risk projecting modern revolutionary ideologies onto pre-modern contexts.⁵⁴ Taken together, these critical engagements enrich our understanding of Ali Shariati's legacy, not as a conclusive doctrine, but as a provocative entry point for ongoing debate on the future of ethical and just leadership in Muslim societies.

Building on these critical engagements, the question of how Ali Shariati's concept of imamate can be meaningfully rearticulated within contemporary pluralistic and democratic contexts becomes increasingly pressing. If, as Soroush suggests, religious authority must remain open to epistemological contestation, and as Ramadan cautions against retrospective idealization of early Islamic history, then Ali Shariati's model of morally grounded leadership requires further institutional and normative clarification. While Ali Shariati envisions the imamate as a form of transformative and ethically driven leadership, this model presupposes a relatively unified *ummah* oriented toward a shared teleological horizon. In contemporary Muslim societies marked by doctrinal plurality, political contestation, and institutional complexity, such unity can no longer be assumed but must be continuously negotiated. As An-Na'im (2008) argues, Islamic political legitimacy in modern contexts depends on inclusive constitutional frameworks and equal citizenship, rather than on substantive moral homogeneity.⁵⁵ In this regard, Ali Shariati's emphasis on direction (*hadaf*) and collective movement (*harakah*) may be reinterpreted through the lens of deliberative pluralism, where the unity of the *ummah* emerges from ongoing dialogue and negotiation. This resonates with broader developments in Islamic political ethics, where *shūrā* is

⁵⁴ Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 182.

⁵⁵ An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 1 & 9.

reconceptualized as a participatory and evolving principle compatible with democratic governance.⁵⁶

At the same time, the issues of accountability and leadership legitimacy reveal deeper tensions within Shariati's framework that were already anticipated in the critiques above. His notion that the *imam* emerges through recognition of intrinsic merit—rather than through institutionalized procedures—reflects a distrust of premature democracy but raises concerns about transparency and public accountability in stable political orders. As Dabashi observes, revolutionary charisma, when detached from institutional constraints, risks reproducing new forms of domination under the guise of moral authority.⁵⁷ This concern aligns with Soroush's insistence that no religiously grounded authority should be immune from critique. Moreover, empirical scholarship on religion and democracy indicates that political legitimacy in contemporary Muslim societies increasingly depends on the interaction between ethical authority and institutional mechanisms such as representation, rule of law, and civic accountability.⁵⁸ Consequently, a viable reconstruction of Shariati's *imamate* would require its transformation from a singular, quasi-transcendent authority into a distributed ethical function embedded within institutions and civil society. Such a reinterpretation preserves Shariati's core commitment to justice and transformation while aligning his vision with the plural, negotiated, and procedurally grounded realities of modern political life.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that Shariati's formulation of *ummah* and *imamate* should not be read as a fixed institutional blueprint, but as a normative and critical

⁵⁶ Andrew F. March, "After Sovereignty: From a Hegemonic to Agonistic Islamic Political Thought," *Political Theory* 52(2) (2024), 259–288.

⁵⁷ Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 498.

⁵⁸ Risky Aulya Ramadan & Shofiyullah Muzammil, "Democracy as Political Jihad: Evaluating Yusuf Qaradhawi's Vision and Its Application in Indonesia," *Islamic Thought Review* 2(1) (2024), 12–25.

horizon within Islamic political thought. His dialectical reading of history, from the symbolic conflict of Qabil and Habil to the transformative role of the *imamate*, offers a powerful ethical critique of domination, inequality, and spiritual stagnation. Yet, as the foregoing analysis has shown, the enduring relevance of this vision depends on its capacity to engage with the demands of pluralism, institutional accountability, and democratic legitimacy in contemporary contexts. Rather than resolving these tensions, Shariati's thought productively exposes them, inviting ongoing reinterpretation and critical appropriation. In this sense, his work occupies a pivotal position within broader debates on Islamic modernity and political theology: not as a conclusive model of governance, but as a provocative framework for reimagining the relationship between moral authority, collective agency, and social transformation. It is from this vantage point that the following conclusion revisits the key findings and outlines the broader implications of this study for the future of Islamic political thought.

Conclusion

Ali Shariati's intellectual contributions provide a nuanced lens for examining the intersections between sociohistorical realities and Islamic principles. His intellectual project offers a compelling framework for rethinking the relationship between Islamic ethics, sociohistorical dynamics, and the pursuit of an ideal society. Through his dialectical interpretation of the Qabil–Habil narrative, Shariati critiques structures of domination while conceptualizing the *ummah* as transformative community guided by *imamate*, as a morally grounded form of leadership. In this formulation, Islam is not merely a doctrinal system but a dynamic ethical force for collective emancipation and social transformation. However, as this study demonstrates, Shariati's framework also contains important limitations. His dualistic reading of history tends to oversimplify complex sociohistorical realities, while his

conception of *imamate*, grounded in charismatic moral authority, raises critical questions regarding its compatibility with pluralism, institutional accountability, and democratic legitimacy.

Rather than diminishing its significance, these tensions highlight the need to reinterpret Shariati's thought as a normative horizon rather than a fixed political blueprint. When engaged alongside contemporary discussions on pluralism, alternative modernities, and Islamic political ethics, his concepts of *ummah* and *imamate* may be rearticulated as ethical resources for fostering participatory, inclusive, and accountable governance. In this sense, *imamate* can be understood not as a singular sacred authority but as a distributed ethical responsibility embedded within institutions and civil society. Such a reinterpretation preserves Shariati's commitment to justice and transformation while aligning his vision with the procedural and pluralist demands of modern political life, thereby reaffirming its continued relevance for ongoing debates on the role of Islam in shaping equitable and humane societies.

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