

Introduction

Not only is al-Mahdi (the Guided One) a materialization of an Islamic belief of a spiritual nature, but a model to a particular goal which humanity has been striving to achieve, as well as a form to a natural inspiration, through which people came to realize – in spite of their different faith and means of access to the unseen – that there is an appointed day on earth, when the Divine messages will be fulfilled in all their great significance and final aim, when the exhausting march which humanity took in the course of history will lead to stability and security, after a long struggle.

However, the awareness of this expected future is not limited to those who believe in the unseen from a religious angle, but it has extended to others and has even been reflected in those ideologies which strongly denied the existence of the unseen and any of its aspects, such as dialectical materialism, that interpreted history in terms of contradictions, but at last admitted the fact that there was an appointed time in which these contradictions would be resolved when peace and harmony would prevail on earth.

Thus we find that the psychological experience of this awareness, which humanity has undertaken in the course of time, is one of the widest and most commonly held among people.

So, if religion strengthens this awareness by reaffirming that at the end of matter, the earth will be filled with justice after having been filled with injustice and tyranny, it is in reality providing it with its objective value and turning it into a decisive belief in human destiny, which is not only a source of consolation but of generosity and strength.

A source of generosity, since belief in al-Mahdi is in reality belief in the protest against all forms of oppression and tyranny although they still prevail in the world.

It is also a source of strength and a refutation that cannot dwindle, since it is a ray of light that is continually struggling against despair within people and keeping the flame of hope ablaze within their hearts in spite of the gloomy conditions and the might of oppression under which they live, because the appointed day confirms the fact that justice can challenge a world filled with transgression and tyranny, that it can shake its foundations, and rebuild it anew; that oppression is only an unnatural condition, regardless of its power and extent in the different corners of the world. that it will eventually be defeated;

that the ultimate defeat of oppression while on the summit of its glory, brings great hope before every persecuted individual and every oppressed nation, in tipping the balance and rebuilding the world.

If the idea of al-Mahdi is older and wider than Islam, the detailed outlines, which the latter has fixed for it, have proved more satisfactory to all those ambitions that have been seeking its realization since the dawn of history as well as a more generous gift and a stronger prediction for the feelings of those who have been persecuted and oppressed in the course of history. This is because Islam has turned the idea from the unseen into reality, and from an aspiration for a saviour the world would produce in the distant and unknown future into the conviction that he actually exists looking forward with other people to that day and the right circumstances that would make it possible for him to assume his great role.

Thus, al-Mahdi (peace be upon him) is no longer an idea waiting to be materialized nor a prophecy that needs to be substantiated, but a living reality and a particular person, living among us in flesh and blood, who is sharing our hopes, suffering, sorrows and joys, actually witnessing all the sufferings, sadness and transgression that exist on the surface of the earth, who is affected with all this from near or far, who is waiting for the appropriate moment when he can stretch his hands to every oppressed and needy person and eradicate the tyrants.

However, it has been decreed that this expected leader is not to reveal anything concerning his life or person to other people, although he is living amongst them, waiting for the appointed moment.

It is obvious that thinking in terms of these Islamic inductions narrows the gap of the unseen between the oppressed people and the expected saviour and reduces the psychological distance between him and them, no matter how long the expectation may last.

So, when we are supposed, as far as we are concerned, to consider the idea of al-Mahdi as actually designating a particular living person who is observing events like we are, it is to inspire us with the fact that the idea of the unconditional protest against all sorts of transgression and tyranny, which al-Mahdi stands for, has already materialized in the expected dissident leader who will emerge, paying no homage to the transgressors, as it has been mentioned in the *hadith* (tradition), and that by believing in him we are in reality believing in this unyielding and living protest and participating in it.

Indeed lots of *ahadith* (traditions) are constantly urging those who believe in al-Mahdi to expect release from suffering and be prepared for his coming, which is a consolidation of that spiritual bond and emotional tie between them and the dissident leader and every value he stands for both of which could not have existed had he not actually materialized as a contemporary living person.

Thus we come to realize that this materialization has given a new impetus to the idea and made it a source of strength and generosity of a higher degree in terms of what any dissident individual finds of comfort consolation and relief from the pains that he has to suffer under tyranny and deprivation, when he comes to feel that his Imam and leader shares them with him, since the latter is a contemporary person and not an idea to be realized in the future.

However, the above mentioned materialization has led many people, who found it hard to believe or assume, to take negative attitudes even regarding the idea of al-Mahdi.

Since they all wonder if the idea of al-Mahdi actually designates a living person who has coexisted with all these consecutive generations for more than ten centuries, who will continue to do so until the time comes for him to emerge on the surface, how can such a human being live all this long and yet be immune from the laws of nature which compel any person to pass by the phase of old age and decrepitude and from there to his death. Is not such a matter impossible from an existential point of view?

Also, why should Allah show all this desire for this particular person – for whom the laws of nature would be obstructed – and endeavours to prolong his life and preserve him for the appointed day. has humanity become barren from yielding capable leaders? Why should not that day come when a leader will be born at its dawn and grow up like anyone else and gradually assume his role until the earth be filled with justice after having been filled with injustice and transgression?

They also wonder if al-Mahdi is the name of a particular person, who is the son of the eleventh Imam of the family of the Prophet (*Ahlul Bayt* – peace and blessing of Allah be upon them), born in the year 256 A.H. whose father died in the year 260 A.H. This means that he was very young when his father died, not exceeding the age of five, which is too early for him to have completed his religious and intellectual education at the hands of his father. Therefore how and by what means could he personally be prepared to assume that great role from religious, intellectual and scientific angles.

Moreover, if the leader is ready why should he wait all these hundreds of years? Is not what the world has witnessed of afflictions and social disasters enough to justify his appearance on its surface for the establishing of justice on earth?

They also wonder how can we believe in his existence even if we were to assume that this could be possible? Can anybody admit the validity of a hypothesis of this kind when it is not actually supported by any conclusive legal or scientific evidence? Should some narratives (*ahadith*) related to the Prophet (blessing and peace of Allah be upon him and his progeny), of which we doubt the authenticity be enough for us to approve such a hypothesis?

As far as the role that this individual is going to play on the appointed day is concerned they wonder how a single person can assume this great decisive role in the world, while we know that however great an individual is, he cannot create history nor lead it into a new phase; whereas the seeds of any historical movement ripen under certain objective circumstances and their coming together. and the sublimity of the individual is the factor which selects him to shape these objective circumstances and provide the required solutions?

They also wonder how we can imagine what this individual would achieve of enormous change and decisive victory for justice and its message against the realities of injustice, oppression and tyranny in

spite of what they have of power and influence and what they possess of means of destruction as well as what they have achieved of high standards in scientific, political, social and military capabilities.

Questions in this connection recur often in one form or another, however the true motives behind them are not only intellectual, since they have also a psychological source expressed in terms of the fear that dominates the world and the meagerness of all opportunity of change from the roots.

Therefore, doubts deepen and questions increase, the more one becomes aware of the harsh reality that has prevailed in the world in the course of time. Thus failure, meagerness and the weakness that the human being is subject to lead him to feel under a psychological pressure whenever he attempts to imagine the tremendous change of the world which would relieve it of its contradictions and historical oppression and would provide it with a new structure based on justice and truth. This pressure makes the individual doubt the whole concept of change and leads him to refuse it for one reason or another.

As far as we are concerned, we are going to deal with all these questions in sequence answering each one briefly due to the limits provided by these pages.

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