

Mahdism From A Social And Political Viewpoint

We will now digress from the religious angle and discuss the question of Mahdism from a sociological point of view. Furthermore, we will not consider Shi'ism in the light of the superficial differences in religious jurisprudence that it has with Sunnism (e.g. laws pertaining to ceremonial ablutions, prayer postures, divorce, etc.), nor will we treat it on the basis of any bias it may hold towards the Ahlul Bayt (Family of the Prophet). It is time to unveil and behold the social and political face of Shi'ism, the sect which has always been a "militant minority" in official Islamic society. In fact, being 'militant' on one hand, and a "minority" on the other, are the two most distinguished and outstanding characteristics of Shi'ism.

Even today, fourteen centuries later, when Shi'ites possess their own country and have freedom of religion, if the number of Shi'ites in the world is estimated as 30,000,000 and compared with the total of 500,000,000 world Muslims, it is clear that the former still only comprises six per cent of the latter. In effect this is still an extremely weak and apparent insignificant minority.¹

However, the militancy and fighting spirit for which the Shi'ites are renowned is manifested in many ways. The following are examples of the very existence of numerous tombs of the descendants of Imams, scattered across the Muslim world; the annual, monthly and even weekly rituals of collective mourning which have now become customary, and a thousand and one stories of the most tragic and disastrous calamities that have befallen the sect's adherents – (the atrocious killings and molestation, the suffering and rejection that proved continual threats to their existence).

It is obvious that the Shi'ites opposed and fought against the ruling powers for a good reason, otherwise they would have never suffered such disasters and catastrophes for the sake of a few differences in religious jurisprudence!

Since their existence and general activity were forced into one of a hidden and underground nature, the Imams, along with their representatives and Shi'ites in general, adopted the idea of camouflage and dissimulation (Taqiyyah) as their slogan and battle cry. Islam's history is filled with the murders, torture, continual harassment and imprisonment that the Shi'ite Imams and their followers suffered at the hands of the Caliphs and leaders of the time. (For example, Abu Dhara al-Ghifari at the hands of Osman, Malik al-Ashtar and Hujr ibn Addi at the order of Mu'awiyah, Hani ibn Urwah during the reign of Yazid,

Da'bal...the First, Second and Third Shaheeds and a host of Shi'ite narrators of tradition and ulema, not forgetting the massacre of 2,000,000 Shi'ites in Ottoman Turkey at the command of Sultan Salim, etc.)

The wealth of sad and heart-rendering prayers, the painfully plaintive complaints that the Shi'ite Imams petitioned to God concerning the wickedness and oppression of the Sultans – the seemingly endless wave of distress and helplessness which engulfed them – all these serve as bitter examples of the persecution, censorship, deprivation and the basic encroachment of civil rights which was the unhappy lot of this depressed and downtrodden "militant minority", as opposed to the happy and fortunate state of the opposing majority and the general iniquity of the age.²

The basic reason is quite simple – all of the trouble and hostility emerged from 'the interpretation of the verse:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ ۖ فَإِنْ تَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَالرَّسُولِ
إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ۚ ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا

"Oh, ye who believe! Obey God, and obey the Apostle, and those charged with authority among you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to God and His Apostle, if you do believe in God and the Last Day; that is best, and most suitable for the final determination". (4:59)

The Shi'ites have never, throughout their history, been able to consciously observe any kind of neutrality or tolerate the wheelings and dealings of any Caliph, Governor or Sultan who had elevated himself to the position of *ulu-l-amr* (vicegerent, or "holder of authority"). They have, however, recognized the importance of such a position, the obedience towards which is obligatory.

They uphold that it is obvious and quite logical that. any authority (*wali al-amr*) should, after God and His Apostle, be a representative of these, and that his government should be imbued with righteousness, and not, as has been the case, act and govern in such a way as would be contradictory and incompatible with the Order of God and the Prophet. A vicegerent, or any authoritative leader who is to be the object of obedience and fidelity of the community should be a Man of God, and nominated by the Lord and His Prophet for this designation.

Therefore, he should possess power of execution, leadership and a sense of duty. In the time of absence of the Imam, he must fulfill the certain conditions and pre-requisites of such a designation – piety, justice, wisdom, competence, etc. Having come to possess such virtues, he must gain the further satisfaction and allegiance of the people or, on the other hand, be chosen by the community.

Furthermore, should the circumstances in any way differ from these, then it is considered tantamount to usurpation and oppression, be it of the kind of Yazid or Mu'awiyah, Haroon and Ma'mun, or Nasser-ud-din Shah and others.

Thus, the basis of hostility towards the Shi'ites can be traced to this point – that is, the whole question of

Government and despotism – an evil totally contrary to Shi'ite belief, and something from which they have always retained rigid abstention.

In the book 'Vo'az al Salatin' by Doctor Ali Vardi (Professor of Sociology at Baghdad University), a whole chapter is devoted to Shi'ism. The author likes Shi'ism to a virtually extinct volcano, virtually extinct in the sense that it still lets out occasional torrents of steam and smoke, and at times can be seen to shake and rumble. He recognizes Shi'ism as the personification and, be it directly or indirectly, the central source of all social and religious revolutions which have taken place in the Islamic world. He adds that in every one of today's Shi'ite ceremonies (such as the mourning and passion-plays connected with Ashura, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (a), dissimulation of belief (Taqiyyah); ijthad (independent judgement) and taqlid (imitation of the mujtahid), there is a clear view of the social elements involved in national militance and the militance of minority groups and schools of thought.

In short, throughout many long centuries, all that has constituted power, be it through wealth or weight of numbers, domination and superiority, opportunity and potential have been enjoyed by the Sunnite majority and the Caliphate system (from the Rashedin Caliphs through the Ummayyads and the Abbasids to the Ottoman Emperors). At the other end of the scale, harassment, calamity and martyrdom was the unhappy fate of the Shi'ite underdogs.

In this light, if Shi'ism has been able to keep its head above water and survive as a sect at all, it has done so in an enigmatic manner. One of the clues to its survival ability is this very hope and conviction that it holds for the emergence of the Concealed Imam, the joy and comfort that his coming will bring, and the final triumph that he will achieve. And that, as a belief, is not to be overlooked.

Imagine, for one moment, a militant sect party whose members, at the hands of the enemy, have been completely scattered and routed, its books burned and destroyed, its leaders beheaded or led before the firing squad and its supporters terrorized and forced to flee or imprisoned. All in all, any line of survival is completely severed leading to absolute defeat (in the fullest sense of the word)! Simultaneously, its enemies try to convince it, or to convince themselves at least, that all its members have either been destroyed or forced to surrender, and that there is no future for them, not even the slightest ray of hope.

In this case, just what will be the spiritual state of these persecuted individuals and that which was once their school of thought? Will there be any possible alternative left open to them save despair and submission, resignation to the treachery and degradation and contamination?

On the other hand, if, in the most difficult and exacting situations and throughout the darkest days of trial and tribulation, a warm flame of faith, hope and expectation has been kept alight in their hearts, then however much the cold, grey ash of destruction may choke and dampen it, it will still flicker with light and life underneath. However frequently their leaders and members are knocked down and destroyed, this faith will not die. At the earliest opportunity, like the Phoenix, they will rise from the ashes and carry on the struggle until victory is achieved.

Therefore, it was quite justifiable to affirm that the belief and expectation of the Shi'ites for the Concealed and Existing Imam, which manifests itself in the ceremonies of 15th Sha'ban, is one of the pillars of the Shi'ite faith. It is a force which offers assurance of its permanence and a guarantee of the final, inevitable victory.

The glad tidings concerning the Universal Saviour, the Mahdi, and the promise and assurance of his eventual emergence were given by the Holy Prophet and their Imams to their followers with the stipulation that it be passed on to future generations. In addition, the events and realities of that unknown future time were explained. True Islam will become weak and the faithful will be burdened with severe problems and difficulties. It was also emphasized that during these times, they must be patient and resist the opposing forces.

Above all, they must always keep in mind that the forthcoming vicegerency upon earth and the defeat of the opponents of justice and religion will stem and be motivated from agents within their own group. Furthermore, those who possess the required perseverance and hope, and continue along the right path despite adversity, will be likened to those who fought for the same cause in the 'retinue of the Prophet' (as the reader will have witnessed in the tradition narrated from Imam Husayn). Such a reminder and glad tidings prove to be an invaluable lesson in hope and comfort. It is also the basic and infallible key to triumph.

Considering the fact that such predictions could have served no useful purpose in solving the problems and difficulties of the period in which they were offered, and that their sole aim was one of instruction and enlightenment of future generations, we can see something of the far-sightedness of those who predicted them. Evidence of their truth and authenticity is presented.

It must be added that amidst all these beliefs and ceremonies, it is not only a limited minority or sect or clan that is involved, but a whole school of thought. It is a school whose flag of hope and encouragement is forever flying, a school which, however bogged down with difficulties and troubles, keeps its eyes firmly fixed on the future, and sees itself as the owner of the key to problems and needs of all ages, with a motive that is not exclusively Arab or Iranian or Shi'ite, but Divine and Universal.

During one of Professor Henry Corbin's annual trips to Iran³ I asked him, during a lecture, whether or not it was true that after the war, there had been a sudden upswing in interest and pre-occupation among European intellectuals towards spiritual and religious matters. Corbin's answer was affirmative, he agreed that there had been a noticeable increase in interest amongst Catholic and other church circles.

"However," he added, "What is the point? The Christian religion is a dead one – however much they endeavour to stride forward, their outlook is still geared to the past and to Christ. They do not have the inclination or desire to furnish answers to the intellectual, ethical, and philosophical questions of the day."

He then continued, *"The Sunnite range of thought also grinds to a halt around the question of prophecy and khatemiat⁴. It is only the Shi'ite faith whose rivers is still in full flow and whose doors are still open."*

Its faith lies in the Imam of the future as the solution to all world problems."

1. Figures given concerning Muslim population may now be out of date. For example, there are 25,000,000 Shi'ites in Iran alone, let alone other countries with heavy Shi'ite population such as Pakistan, India, Iraq, etc.

2. We read in the Sunday and Thursday prayers of Imam Sajjad (a), and also in the Iftitah prayer that, "O God, we complain to you ..."

3. Corbin, Professor in Islamic Studies at Paris University and the successor to the late Louis Massignon, is also Director of the Iran-France Institute and one of the leading contemporary orientalists. He used to – and still may – make annual trips to Iran where he would study and research into his own subject from close quarters. A feature of his visits was the weekly meetings he would hold. Several were also attended by the revered and renowned Islamic theologian, Hajj Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai, present, incidentally, at the meeting in question.

4. Khatemiat – the question of the Prophetic Cycle and its conclusion with the Prophet Muhammad.

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