

Replies To The Objections

(a) Longevity

Is it possible for any human being to continue to live for many centuries, as is presumed in the case of this Awaited Saviour who has already lived for more than 1145 years? This long life is about 14 times the life of an ordinary man who passes through all stages of life from infancy to old age.

The impossibility of such a long life is the objection. Let us have a close look at the objection. The word impossibility here (like any other truth) is relative. It has meaning only in relation to some person, place and time.

What is impossible for one person need not be so for the others. Then what is impossible in one place may be quite possible in another place. Again what is not possible at one time may be quite possible at another. There is no dearth of illustrations to prove how impossibility is a relative term.

In other words, the possibility of a thing may be of three categories viz. factual possibility, scientific possibility and logical possibility. To journey across the ocean, to reach the bottom of the sea and to travel to the moon are practical possibilities. There are people who have accomplished these tasks in one way or another.

By a scientific possibility we mean that there may be certain things which may not be practicable in the present circumstances but there exists no scientific reason to justify the denial of their practicability in favourable circumstances and the scientific trends indicate that they will be feasible sooner or later. For example, there exists no scientific reason to deny the possibility of man's travelling to Venus. Although, it has not been possible for anyone to go to that planet so far, yet we know that there is only a difference of degree between man's landing on the moon and his landing on Venus.

It is only a question of surmounting additional difficulties because of the greater distance. Hence, it is scientifically possible to go to Venus, though practically it is still impossible. In contrast, it is scientifically impossible to go to the sun in the sense that science does not hope that it will ever be possible to manufacture a protective shield against the heat of the sun which is virtually a huge furnace blazing at

the highest imaginable degree of temperature.

By a logical possibility we mean that, on the basis of self-evident laws, reason does not regard a thing impossible. For example, it is logically impossible to divide three oranges into two equal parts without cutting anyone of them. It is self-evident that, three being an odd number, it is not divisible into two whole numbers.

Only an even number can be so divided and the same number cannot be both odd and even simultaneously, because that will mean self-contradiction which is impossible. But a man's entering into fire without being hurt or going to the sun without being affected by its heat is not logically impossible, for it is not self-contradictory to suppose that heat does not pass from a body having a higher temperature to a body having a lower temperature. Only experience has proved that if two bodies are mixed or put together, heat passes from a body having higher temperature to a body having lower temperature, till the temperature of both the bodies is at par.

Thus, we know that the scope of the logical possibility is wider than that of the scientific possibility and the scope of the scientific possibility is wider than that of the practical possibility.

There is no doubt that a person's remaining alive for thousands of years is not logically impossible, for there is nothing irrational or self-contradictory about it. Life itself does not imply the sense of quick death.

Admittedly, such a long life is not as practical as descending to the bottom of the sea or ascending to the moon. Notwithstanding the present scientific facilities it has not so far been possible to prolong human life to hundreds of years. Even those who have all the modern facilities at their disposal and are the keenest to continue to live cannot have more than the normal span of life.

As for the scientific possibility there exists nothing to justify its denial from a theoretical point of view. In fact this question is related to the physiological explanation of senility. The question is, whether there exists a natural law according to which human tissues and cells, after attaining the stage of full development, automatically begin to stiffen and degenerate, till they cease functioning at a particular moment or the senile degeneration is caused by some external factors, such as microbes and poisons infiltrating into the body through polluted food, unhealthy jobs or some other causes.

It is a question with which science is grappling at present and is earnestly trying to find an answer to it. For the present there is more than one scientific explanation of senility. Anyhow, if we accept the view that senile degeneration is caused by external influences, it means that if the tissues of the human body are secluded from these particular influences it is theoretically possible to prolong life, to delay senility and even to control it eventually.

The other view tends to suppose that living cells and tissues are governed by a natural law according to which they carry within themselves the seeds of their complete exhaustion. They, in their natural course,

pass through the stages of old age and senility and eventually cease to function.

Even if we accept this view it does not mean that this natural law is not flexible. In fact it is supposed to be a flexible law, for we see in our ordinary life, and it has been confirmed by scientific laboratory observations also, that senility is an untimely physiological phenomenon in the sense that sometimes it appears early and sometimes very late.

It is a common experience which has also been confirmed by the observations of the physicians, that many a man of advanced age still possess a supple body and do not suffer from any old age ailments. It is because of the flexibility of this natural law that the scientists have already succeeded in prolonging the life of certain animals, hundreds of times beyond their normal span of life by artificially creating conditions conducive to the delay of senility.¹

They have falsified the law of natural senility by acquiring brilliant successes and have made it clear scientifically that to postpone senility or to provide opportunities and specified factors therefore is possible and if present day science is not able to enforce this programme in the case of phenomena like human beings it is on account of the fact that more difficulties are involved in the matter with regard to man as compared with other animals.

In a nutshell, it is logically and scientifically possible to prolong life, though it is still practically impossible to do so. Anyhow, science is endeavouring to make it practical also.

If we consider the question of the Mahdi's age in this light there appears to be nothing strange or surprising about it, for it has been proved that such a long life is logically and scientifically possible and the scientists are working to turn its possibility into a reality. All that appears to be surprising is that the Mahdi has attained such a long life before the scientists have been able to turn its theoretical possibility into a practical one. This phenomenon can be compared to the discovery of a cure for cancer or brain haemorrhage before science can make such a discovery.

If the question is how Islam, which planned the age of the Awaited Saviour, could anticipate science in this field the answer is simple. This is not the only field wherein Islam has anticipated science. The Islamic *Shari'ah* as a whole anticipated the scientific movement and the natural development of human thinking by several centuries. Islam had already presented, for practical application, the laws which science has taken hundreds of years to discover.

It has propounded doctrines, the wisdom of which has been corroborated by science only recently. It disclosed such secrets of the universe which none could think of at that time and the truth of which was later confirmed by science. If we believe in this, then it is not too much for Allah, the Exalted, to anticipate science in planning the age of the Mahdi. We have talked of only those aspects of anticipation which we can see directly. We can add other instances about which Qur'an has told us.

Here we have talked of only those aspects of anticipation by Islam vis-à-vis science which we can

observe directly. It is, however, possible for us to add some other instances of anticipation about matters which it has not been possible for science to comprehend so far. For example, Qur'an tells us that the holy Prophet was carried one night from Masjid al-Haram (at Mecca) to Masjid al-Aqsa (at Jerusalem).

If we try to perceive the quality of this journey within the framework of natural laws it points to the application of laws which govern nature in this sense that science has not yet been able to understand them and it will take it hundreds of years more to specify their quality. The same Divine Knowledge, which granted the holy Prophet this high speed long before science could consider it to be possible, also granted long life to his last Divinely appointed successor, long before it could be achieved by science.

(b) Suspension of laws

It is true, as far as common experience and the experiments carried out so far by the scientists are concerned, this long life granted by Allah to the Awaited Saviour appears to be very unusual. But his role of revolutionizing the world order and rebuilding the entire system on the basis of justice and truth is also so extraordinary that neither are the people familiar with it nor has it ever been experienced in history. So it should not be surprising if at the preparatory stage also his role is preceded by some unusual and extraordinary events, like his long life.

Howsoever, unfamiliar these events may be, they are not more unusual than the great role to be performed by the Mahdi on the appointed day. If we can relish that role, having no precedent throughout history, there is no reason why we should not relish his long life unprecedented in our ordinary life.

We wonder if it is a mere chance that each of the only two persons who undertook to purify the human civilization of all its impurities and to reconstruct the world should have had a very long life span, several times that of a usual one. One of them played his role in the past. He was Noah, about whom the holy Qur'an has expressly said that he lived among his people for 950 years. He reconstructed the world after the Deluge.

The other is to play his role in the future. He is the Mahdi who has already lived among his people for more than a thousand years and is destined to play his role on the appointed day and build the world anew.

How is it then that we accept the longevity of Noah who lived at least for about a thousand years and deny that of the Mahdi.

We have learnt that a long life is scientifically possible but let us suppose that it is not so and the law of senility is inexorable and cannot be defied either today or in future. Then what does this mean? It means only this that to live for centuries, as is the case with Noah and the Mahdi, is contrary to the natural laws established by science through modern methods of experimentation and investigation.

In this case a long life may be accepted as a miracle which suspends a natural law in particular

circumstances to preserve the life of a particular person entrusted with a celestial mission. This miracle is not unique in its kind, nor is it alien to the Muslim belief derived from the text of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

The law of senility is not any the more relentless than the law of the exchange of heat, according to which heat passes from a body having a higher temperature to a body having a lower temperature. This law was suspended to protect Abraham when he was thrown into the burning fire, for this was the only way to preserve his life. The holy Qur'an says:

"We said: O fire, be coolness and peace for Abraham". (Surah al-Anbia', 21:69).

Accordingly, he came out of the fire unscathed.

In many other cases also natural laws were suspended to protect the prophets and other Divinely appointed people.

The sea was parted for Moses. It appeared to the Romans that they had captured Jesus whereas they had not. Muhammad got out of his house while it was surrounded by a mob of the tribe of Quraish, waiting for an opportunity to assassinate him. Allah concealed him, so that the Quraishites could not see him when he walked out through their midst. In all these cases natural laws were suspended for the protection of the people whose lives the Divine Wisdom wanted to preserve. The law of senility too, can be bracketed with these cases of suspension.

From the above discussion we can arrive at a general conclusion and say: Whenever it is necessary to preserve the life of one of the chosen servants of Allah to enable him to accomplish his mission, the Divine Grace intervenes to protect him and one of the natural laws is suspended. On the contrary if the period of his appointment comes to an end and the task entrusted to him by the Almighty is accomplished he meets death in accordance with the natural laws related to life or is martyred.

In this connection we are usually confronted with the following questions.

How can a natural law be suspended and the compulsory relationship existing between the various phenomena be severed?

Will such a suspension not be in contradiction with science which has discovered that law determines the compulsory relationship on the basis of experimentation and investigations?

Science itself has provided an answer to this question. It has already given up the idea of compulsion in respect of natural laws. It only says that these laws are discovered on the basis of systematic observation and experiment. When it is observed that one phenomenon invariably follows another, this invariability is treated as a natural law.

But science does not claim that there exists a binding and compulsory relationship between any two phenomena, because compulsion is a factor which cannot be proved by experiment and scientific

methods of investigation. Modern science confirms that a natural law as defined by it, speaks only of an invariable association between two phenomena and is not concerned with any compulsory relationship between them.²

Hence, if a miracle takes place and the natural relationship between two phenomena breaks down it does not amount to the breaking down of a compulsory relationship.

In fact, a miracle in its religious sense has become more comprehensive in the light of modern scientific theory than it was when the classical view of casual nexus prevailed. According to the old theory it was presumed that the phenomena invariably associated with each other must have an inevitable relationship between them and this inevitability meant that their separation from each other was inconceivable. According to modern scientific thinking, however, this relationship has been transformed into a law of association or invariable succession.

Thus, a miracle need not come into clash with inevitability any longer. It is only on exceptional state of the invariability of association and succession.

We agree with the scientific view that modern scientific methods cannot prove the existence of an inevitable relationship between any two phenomena. Anyhow, we are of the view that there must still be some explanation of the invariability of association and succession. As it can be explained on the basis of the theory of intrinsic inevitability, it can also be explained if we assume that it is the Wisdom of the Organizer of the universe which requires a particular phenomenon to be invariably related to some other phenomenon and that in certain cases the same wisdom may require that there should be an exception. Such exceptional cases are called miracles.

Now let us take up the question as to why Allah is so keen to prolong the Mahdi's life that, even natural laws are suspended for his sake. Is it not advisable to leave the leadership of the appointed day to a person to be born in the future and brought up according to the needs of that time? In other words, what is the justification for this long occultation?

Most of the people who ask this question do not want an answer simply based on belief. It is not enough to say that we believe it to be so. What the interrogators really want is a social explanation of the position in the light of the tangible requirements of the great change expected to be brought about by the Mahdi.

Hence, we leave aside for the time being the qualifications we believe the infallible Imams to have possessed and take up instead the following question:

Is it likely, in the light of the past experience, that such a long life of the leader-designate will contribute to his success and will enable him to play his role better?

Our reply to this question is in the affirmative. Some of the reasons are given below:

The proposed great revolutionary change requires that its leader should possess a unique mental

calibre. He should be conscious of his own superiority and the insignificance of the knotty system he has to overthrow. The more conscious he is of the insignificance of the corrupt society he has to fight against, the more prepared he will be psychologically to wage a war till victory is won.

It is evident that the size of his mental calibre should be proportionate to the size of the proposed change and the size of the social system required to be eliminated. The more extensive and deep-seated this system is, the greater should be the psychological push required.

The mission being to revolutionize the world, full of injustice and oppression, and to bring about a radical change in all its cultural values and diverse systems, it is but natural that it should be entrusted to a person whose mental calibre is higher than that of anyone in the whole of the existing world and who may not have been born and brought up under the influence of the society required to be demolished and replaced by another culture of justice and righteousness. One brought up under the shadow of a deep-seated and world-dominating culture is naturally impressed and overawed by it, that being the only culture which he has seen and by which he has been influenced from a tender age.

But the case should be different with a person who has a long historical background, who has witnessed several great cultures successively grow and decline, who has seen the big historical changes with his own eyes and has not read about them in books, who has been a contemporary of all the stages of the development of that culture which happens to be the last chapter of the human history before the appointed day and who has seen all its ups and downs. Such a person, who himself has lived through all these stages very carefully and attentively, is competent to look at the culture he has to grapple with in its historical perspective and is not daunted by its magnitude. He does not regard it as an unalterable destiny. His attitude to it will not be like that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) to the French monarchy.

It is reported that Rousseau, in spite of being a great champion of political revolution from an intellectual and a philosophical point of view, shuddered at the very thought of there being a France without a king, the reason being that he was born and brought up and had always lived under the shadow of monarchy. But the man having a long historical background and being fully aware of the historical factors knows perfectly well how and when the prevailing culture and the prevailing system came into being and developed. He knows that the historical age of the cultures and systems, howsoever long, is very limited. Have you read the Surah al-Kahf (Chapter 18 of the holy Qur'an) and have you gone through the story of the youths who believed in Allah and were virtuous, but had to face an idolatrous system which was dominant at that time and which ruthlessly crushed every idea of Monotheism? They felt greatly distressed and lost all hope. In utter despair they took refuge in a cave, for they were at their wits' end and did not know what to do. They prayed to Allah to resolve their difficulty.

They thought that the then existing unjust system would continue to prevail for ever and would liquidate all those whose hearts throbbed for the truth. Do you know what Allah did? He sent them to sleep in the cave for 309 years. Then He awakened them and sent them back to the scene of life. By then the unjust

regime, the power and tyranny which had dazzled them, had completely collapsed and become a part of past history.

This arrangement was made to enable those young men to see themselves the downfall of falsehood, the power and grandeur which had overawed them. The people of the cave achieved moral uplift and sublimation through this unique experience which extended their lives for three hundred years. The same privilege will be enjoyed by the Awaited Saviour through his long life which will enable him to see the giant dwindling into a dwarf, a lofty tree shrinking to become a mere seed leaf and a tornado turning into a mere whiff of the wind.

Furthermore, the experience gained through the direct and close study of so many successive cultures will widen the mental horizon of the person designated to lead the revolution and will prepare him better for the accomplishment of his mission. He will have benefited by the experience of others, knowing their strong and weak points, and will be in a better position to assess social developments correctly in their true historical context.

As the revolution to be brought about by the Awaited Saviour is to be ideological and based on the message of Islam, the very nature of his mission requires him to be close to the early Islamic sources and to have a personality built independently of and detached from the influences of the culture he is destined to fight. A person born and brought up under the shadow of a particular culture cannot in all probability, escape its effects totally, even if he leads a campaign against it. To ensure that the leader-designate is not himself influenced by the culture he is expected to change, his personality must be built fully at a cultural stage closer in its general spirit to the system he wants to establish.

(c) His training for the mission

Now we come to the third question as to how the preparation of the Awaited Saviour for his mission was completed, as he was only about five years old when his father, Imam Hasan al-Askari died. This age is the time of early childhood and the child is not old enough for the development of the personality of a leader. Then how did his personality develop?

The answer is that several of his forefathers also assumed the Imamate at an early age. Imam Muhammad ibn Ah al-Jawad assumed it when he was only eight years old and Imam Ali ibn Muhammad al-Hadi when he was only nine.

It should be observed that the phenomenon of the early Imamate reached its zenith in the case of the Imam Mahdi. We call it a phenomenon, because it assumed a tangible and practical form as in the case of Imam Mahdi's forefathers. It was felt and experienced by the Muslims coming into contact with the Imam concerned. Experience of the people being the best proof of a phenomenon, we cannot be asked to give a more tangible or a more convincing proof of it. The following points will elucidate what we mean:

(i) The Imamate of an Imam belonging to the Holy House was not a centre of hereditary power and influence, nor did it have the backing of any ruling regime, as was the case with the Imamate of the Fatimid caliphs and the caliphate of the Abbasid caliphs. The extensive popular support and allegiance which the Imams enjoyed was due only to their spiritual influence and the conviction of their followers that they alone deserved the leadership of Islam on spiritual and intellectual grounds.

(ii) The popular bases supporting the Imamate had existed since the early days of the Islamic era. They expanded further during the time of the Imam Baqir and Imam Sadiq. The school set up by them assumed the form of an extensive intellectual movement which included among its ranks hundreds of legists, scholastic theologians, exegetes and others learned in various fields of Islamic scholarship and the humanities known at that time. Hasan ibn Ali Washsha, when visiting the Masjid of Kufah, found there 900 scholars all repeating the traditions narrated to them by Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Sadiq.³

(iii) The qualifications which an Imam possessed, as believed in by this school and the popular bases represented by it, were very high. The Imam was judged by the standard of these qualifications to find out whether he was really fit to be an Imam. They believed that the Imam must be the most learned and wise man of his time.

(iv) The school and the popular bases had to make great sacrifices for the sake of their belief in the Imamate which the contemporary governments regarded as a hostile line, at least from the ideological angle. This attitude led the then authorities to the persecution of the followers of the Imams. Many people were killed. Many others were thrown into dungeons. Hundreds died while in detention. Their belief in the Imamate of the Prophet's House used to cost them dear. The only attraction was their conviction of gaining the favour of Allah.

(v) The Imams, whose Imamate these popular bases acknowledged, were not living like the kings in high towers isolated from their followers. They never segregated themselves, except when imprisoned, exiled or forcibly kept aloof by the ruling juntas. This we know for certain on the authority of a large number of reporters who have narrated the sayings and deeds of each of the first eleven Imams. Similarly, we have a record of the correspondence exchanged between the Imams and their contemporaries.

The Imams used to make journeys to various places and appointed their deputies in different parts of the Muslim world. Their supporters also, while visiting the holy places during Hajj, made it a point to call on them at Madina. All this meant a continuous contact between the Imams and their followers scattered all over the Muslim world.

(vi) The contemporary caliphs always regarded the Imams and their spiritual leadership as a threat to themselves and their dynasty. For this reason, they did all they could to disrupt this leadership and in pursuance of their nefarious ends, they resorted to many mean and arbitrary actions. Occasionally their behaviour was too harsh and despotic. The Imams themselves were continuously chased and kept in

detention. Such actions were painful and disgusting to all the Muslims, especially to the supporters of the Imams.

These six points comprise historical facts. If we take them into consideration, we can easily come to the conclusion that the early Imamate was a real fact and not a fiction. It is certain that an Imam who appeared on the scene at a very early age, who proclaimed himself to be the spiritual and intellectual leader of the Muslims and who was acknowledged to be so by a vast cross-section of the people must have had great knowledge, competence and mastery over all branches of theology. Otherwise, the popular bases could not be convinced of his Imamate.

We have already said that these bases had continuous contact with the Imams and were in a position to judge their personalities. It is not conceivable that so many people should have accepted a boy to be their Imam and should have made sacrifices for his sake without ascertaining his real worth and assessing his competence. Even if it is presumed that the people made no immediate efforts to ascertain the position, still the truth could not remain unknown for years in spite of the continuous contact between the child Imam and the people. Had he been childish in his knowledge and thinking, he would certainly have been exposed.

Even if it is supposed that the popular bases of the Imamate could not discover the truth, it was easy for the government of the day to expose the child, if he had been really childish in his thinking and cultural attainments like all other children. It certainly would have been in the interest of the government of the day to bring him before his supporters and others to prove that he was not fit to be an Imam and a spiritual and intellectual leader.

It might have been difficult to prove the incompetence of a man of 40 to 50, but it would have been quite easy to prove the incompetence of an ordinary child, howsoever intelligent he might have been. Evidently this would have been much simpler and easier than the complex and risky policy of suppression adopted by those in power at that time. The only explanation for why the government kept quiet and did not play this card is that it had realized that the early Imamate was a real phenomenon and not a concoction.

The fact is that the government did attempt to play that card but did not succeed. History tells us of such attempts and their failures, but it does not report any occasion on which the child Imam vacillated or showed signs of such embarrassment as could shake the confidence of the people believing in his early Imamate.

That is what we meant when we said that the early Imamate was really a phenomenon and not a mere presumption. This phenomenon has deep roots, for there exist parallel cases throughout the history of the heavenly mission and Divine leadership. We cite just one instance.

We commanded John; Zachariah's son, to follow the guidance of the Lord with due steadfastness. To John We gave knowledge and wisdom during his childhood', (Surah Maryam,

After it has been proved that the early Imamate had been a real phenomenon already existing in the life of the people of the Prophet's House, no exception can be taken to the Imamate of the Mahdi and his succession to his father while he was still a child.

(d) Reasons for his continued existence

Now we come to the fourth question. Even if it is presumed that theoretically the existence of the Mahdi, with all its implication including the long life, the early Imamate and the complete occultation is possible, how can we believe that he actually exists, for a mere possibility is not enough to prove that. As the concept of the Mahdi is unusual and extraordinary, the existence of a few sayings of the holy Prophet, which are enshrined in the books, is not enough to prove that the existence of the Mahdi is a historical fact and not a mere presumption which has seized the imagination of a large number of people for certain psychological reasons.

The answer to this question is this that the concept of the Mahdi as the Awaited Saviour who is to change the world for the better has been mentioned in the traditions of the holy Prophet generally and in the sayings of the Imams particularly. It has been emphasized in so many passages that there is no reason to doubt it. The number of the reports on this subject found in the books of our Sunni brethren comes to 400,⁴ and the total number of the reports found in both the Shi'ah and the Sunni sources comes to more than 6,000.⁵ This is a colossal figure, unparalleled in the case of most of those Islamic issues which are not usually doubted by any Muslim.

As for the embodiment of this concept in the person of the twelfth Imam, there exists enough justification to believe that. This justification can be summarized in two arguments, one being Islamic and the other scientific.

By the Islamic argument we prove the existence of the Awaited Saviour and by the scientific argument we prove that the Mahdi is not a mere myth but his existence is a fact proved by historical experience.

As for the Islamic argument, it is represented by hundreds of traditions which have come down from the holy Prophet and the Imams of his House. They specify that the Mahdi will belong to the Prophet's House, will be descended from his daughter Fatimah-tuz-Zehra and will be the descendant of Imam Husayn in the ninth generation.

The traditions also say that the total number of the caliphs will be twelve. Thus, the traditions give a specific shape to the general idea of the Mahdi and determine that he is none other than the twelfth Imam of the Prophet's House. The number of these traditions is very large in spite of the fact that the Imams were very reserved on this subject, for fear of an attempt on the life of the Mahdi.

It is not only because of their number that we have to accept these traditions, but there are also other

indications of their authenticity. According to the different versions of a tradition of the holy Prophet, he has to be succeeded by twelve caliphs, by twelve Imams, or by twelve commanders.

The total number of reports about this saying as counted by some writers exceeds 270 and they are found in the most celebrated Shi'ah and Sunni books, such as Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sahih Tirmizy, Sunan Abu Dawud, Ahmad's Musnad and Hakim's Mustadrak. It may be noted that Bukhari, who has quoted this tradition, was a contemporary of Imam Muhammad bin Ali al-Jawad, Imam Ali bin Muhammad al-Hadi and Imam Hasan al-Askari.

This fact has great significance, for it proves that the tradition was recorded before its contents could materialize. Hence, it cannot be suspected that it is a possible reflection on the actual number of the Imam, as believed by the Twelver Shi'ah to reinforce their belief in the twelve Imams. This is because the spurious sayings attributed to the holy Prophet refer to the events which take place earlier and the saying comes afterwards. Such sayings do not precede the events nor are they recorded in the books of tradition earlier.

So long as we possess material evidence of the fact that the tradition was recorded before the number of the Imams was actually completed we can safely say that it is not a reflection on an accomplished fact. It is only an expression of a divine truth, expressed by him who never spoke whimsically, and a prophecy which was subsequently fulfilled by the actual number of the Imams beginning with Imam Ali and ending with Imam Mahdi.

As for the scientific argument, we have to state that it consists of the experience of a large number of people for a period covering about seventy years. This period is known as that of minor occultation. To elucidate the point we propose to explain minor occultation briefly.

The minor occultation represents the first stage of the Imamate of the Awaited Saviour who was destined to keep himself physically absent from the public scene, from the very inception of his Imamate, though he still continues to take an intelligent interest in what happens around him. Had this occultation come suddenly it would have been a great shock to his supporters, for they had been accustomed to be always in contact with the Imam and to consult him on their divergent problems.

His sudden disappearance would have caused a big vacuum which might have absorbed and even destroyed the whole organisation, for his supporters would have felt that they had been cut off from their spiritual and intellectual leadership. In order to familiarize them with the idea of occultation and to enable them to adapt themselves to the new situation it was felt necessary that a preparatory stage should precede the final occultation.

This stage was that of minor occultation during which the Imam disappeared from the public scene, but maintained his contact with his followers through certain representatives who formed a connecting link between him and those who believed in his role as an Imam. During this period four persons, whose piety and impeccability was recognized by all, occupied the position of the vicegerents of the Imam.

They are as under:

1. Uthman ibn Sa'id al-'Amravi
2. Muhammad ibn Uthman 'Amravi
3. Abu'l Qasim Husayn ibn Ruh Nawbakhti
4. Abu'l Hasan Ali ibn Muhammad al-Simmari

These four persons performed the duties of his vicegerent in the above order. As and when one of them died, another was duly appointed by the Mahdi to succeed him.

The vicegerent was in contact with: the Shi'ah. He carried their questions to the Imam and submitted their problems to him. He also conveyed the Imam's replies to his followers. The replies used to be mostly in writing and were occasionally verbal. The people who missed the sight of the Imam, found consolation in correspondence and indirect contact. All the letters received from the Imam during the tenure of his four vicegerents, which lasted for about seventy years, Were in the same hand-writing and in the same style and bore the same signature.

Al-Simmari was the last vicegerent. He announced the end of the stage of the minor occultation, the distinctive feature of which was the appointment of the particular vicegerent. It was turned into the major occultation after its object had been achieved and the Shi 'ah had gradually adapted themselves to the absence of the Imam.

They had been immunized against the shock and the vacuum. Following the major occultation, instead of being represented by a specially appointed vicegerent, the Imam is now represented in a general way by the qualified *mujtahids* (eminent legists, capable of arriving at an independent decision on issues of religious law) having a keen insight into both the spiritual and temporal affairs. Now, in the light of the foregoing, it can easily be inferred that the existence of the Mahdi is a fact which was experienced by a larger number of the people.

He was represented by his vicegerents for seventy long years during. which they dealt with so many people but no one observed any inconsistency in what they said, nor discovered any signs of deception in their conduct. Is it conceivable that a fraud could be continued for seventy years by four persons, one after the other, without giving rise to the least suspicion? These four persons had no special link with each other and no collusion between them could be suspected. Their conduct was above reproach. They gained the confidence of all and everyone believed in the genuineness of their claim and the reality of their experience.

An old proverb says that truth will always come but. Events of practical life also prove that a fraud has no chance to last for such a long time in such a way. It is not possible to deal with so many people fraudulently and at the same time to gain their confidence.

Thus we know that the minor occultation is tantamount to a scientific experiment to prove the facts about the Awaited Saviour including his birth, life and occultation and the general proclamation of his major occultation, according to which he retired from the scene of life and does not now disclose his identity to anyone.

(e) Reasons for his delay in appearance

Why did the Saviour not appear during all this period when he had already prepared himself for the intended task? What prevented him from reappearing on the scene of life during the period of the minor occultation or immediately thereafter, instead of converting it into the major occultation? At the time it was simpler and easier to bring about the required change.

He had a good opportunity at that time to mobilize his forces and to start his work forcefully because he already had contact with the people through the organization which existed during the period of the minor occultation. Moreover, at that time the ruling powers were not so powerful as they subsequently became as a result of the scientific and industrial development.

The successful execution of a revolutionary order depends on certain pre-requisites and on the existence of a particular atmosphere. Unless these conditions are fulfilled and that atmosphere is created, it cannot achieve its object.

As regards the Divinely ordained shape of things it has two aspects. As far as its missionary aspect is concerned it, being Divinely ordained, does not depend on any congenial atmosphere, but, as far as its operational side is concerned, its timing and success is linked with the conducive circumstances.

The same was the reason why the pre-Islamic period of five centuries had to elapse before the Last Divine Message came to Prophet Muhammad, though the world had been in dire need of it since a far earlier time. It was delayed only because its successful completion was linked with certain suitable circumstances.

The conducive circumstances, which affect the accomplishment of the change, include those which create a suitable atmosphere for it and those which determine the right moment for the beginning of the operation. For example, the revolution which was successfully led by Lenin in Russia was linked with certain factors, such as the out-break of the First World War and the decline of the Czarist regime. In addition, there were some minor factors also. For instance, Lenin's safe journey during which he secretly slipped into Russia. If he had met with some accident which might have impeded his entry into that country at that time, the revolution would possibly have been delayed.

It has been the unalterable practice, decreed by Allah, that the actual implementing of a Divine revolution is linked up with such objective circumstances as create the right climate and general atmosphere for its success. That is why there was a long gap of a several hundred of years before the appearance of Islam during which period no prophet was raised.

No doubt Allah is All-powerful. He can miraculously remove in advance all difficulties and obstacles impeding a Divine Mission. But He does not do so, because the tests, trials and tribulations through which man gains perfection require that a Divine revolution should come about in a natural and normal manner. This does not mean that occasionally Allah does not intervene in arranging certain details not related to the creation of the right atmosphere but which tend to give an impetus to the revolution. The Divine help rendered by Allah to his friends at critical junctures for the purpose of protecting their mission was of this nature.

The fire set alight by Nimrud did no harm to Abraham; the hand of the treacherous Jew who had drawn his sword to kill Muhammad was paralysed and, a strong wind hit the camp of the infidels who had besieged Madina during the Battle of the Ditch and demoralized them. In all these cases help was rendered at a critical juncture, but only after the right atmosphere for the desired change had already been created in a natural manner.

On this basis, when we study the position of the Imam Mahdi, we find that the revolutionary task which has been entrusted to him like any other process of a social change is linked with certain circumstances which will provide the right climate for its success. Hence, it is natural that it should be timed accordingly. It is known that the great task, for which Imam Mahdi has prepared himself, is not of a limited nature nor is it confined to any particular region.

His mission in fact is to revolutionize the world order in its entirety. It is to rescue mankind from the darkness of vice and to usher in an era of light and guidance. For such a gigantic revolution the mere existence of a task and a leader is not enough, otherwise it would have been accomplished during the period of the holy Prophet himself. Such a revolution requires specific climate and a general atmosphere conducive to the fulfilment of all the prerequisites.

From man's viewpoint the frustration and disillusionment of a man of culture may be considered to be the basic factor in creating the right climate. This feeling stems from the failure of diverse cultural experiments. Only then does a man of culture feel that he is in need of help and turns to the unknown. From the material angle the modern conditions of life may be regarded as more suitable for the fulfilment of a mission on world level than the conditions which prevailed at the time of occultation, for now the distances have been shortened, the chances of contact between various people of the world have been improved and better facilities for a central organisation to enlighten mankind on the basis of the new message have become available.

It is true, as pointed out in the question, that the military power and the war equipment which the Awaited Leader would have to face have enormously grown, but it is to be remembered that material power is of no consequence when man is moralized and is determined to fight against injustice.

Many a lofty civilization in history has collapsed at the first touch of an invader, because it was already dilapidated and lacked the power of resistance.

(f) His superhuman role

Now we come to another question of the above-mentioned series. The question is whether a single individual, howsoever great he may be, can accomplish such a great task, when it is known that a great man is only he whom the circumstances bring forward to be in the forefront of the events.

This question is based on a particular viewpoint about history which explains historical developments on the basis that man is only a secondary factor, whereas the main factor consists of the forces which work around him. Man at the most can be described as an intelligent interpreter of the inter-play of these forces.

It is evident that history has two poles, one of them being man and the other the material forces around him. Just as the material forces influence man like the conditions of production similarly man also influences the material forces around him. There is no justification for supposing that action always begins with matter and ends at man. The opposite can also be as true. In history, man and matter have always been interacting. If the interacting force of man is celestial then his role in life will also assume the celestial hue. Then it is the Divine force which directs the course of history.

This is a fact which is abundantly proved by the history of the mission of the Prophets and especially by the life history of the last Divine Messenger, for Muhammad (P) assumed the control of the course of history and created a culture which could not be created by the external circumstances around him.⁶ Hence, what was possible to be accomplished by the greatest of the Prophets can also be accomplished at the hands of the Awaited Saviour of his Family – The Leader whose appearance has been predicted by the holy Prophet and about whose great role he has already informed mankind.

(g) His modus operandi

Now we come to the last question which is about the method which the Mahdi is likely to adopt to achieve his objective of the final victory of justice and of the complete eradication of injustice.

A definite answer to this question depends not only on the knowledge of the timing and the stage at which the Mahdi will reappear but also on the possibility of imagining what particular circumstances will be prevailing at that time. It is only in the light of these circumstances that a picture of his possible strategy can be drawn. So long as we do not know at what stage the Mahdi will reappear and what will be the prevailing circumstances at that time, it is not possible to make any prediction on scientific lines. Any presumptions made in this connection will be based mostly on fiction and not on facts. Anyhow, there is one basic presumption which can be accepted in the light of the traditions and the historical experience of the great changes.

This much can in any case be predicted safely that the Awaited Saviour – will appear when the stage for his appearance is set, neither earlier nor later. Let us be clear as to the meaning – of this stage for his

appearance. This stage means the conditions prevailing in the world and in the human society. It means the decline in man's moral life, when oppression and tyranny will be rampant and when mankind will have fallen into the abyss of crime and immorality.

In addition, this stage for his appearance means that the conditions then prevailing would create the necessary psychological atmosphere for the reception of a saviour. Mankind would be dead tired and fed up with the shape of things and would quite naturally look forward to a saviour for its liberation. This will happen when wickedness will reach its climax. There will be a great upheaval, a great conflagration, that will send this universe to its doom. In the darkness that will then prevail, there will dawn a new Sun in the form of the Mahdi, spreading light and lustre. Having liberated mankind from its misery and curse, the Mahdi will then bring about a transformation of life in which justice, peace, virtue and righteousness will abound. Thus will the Awaited Imam accomplish his mission.

Certain Islamic traditions speak of a government of the virtuous which is to continue until the appearance of the Mahdi (May Allah hasten his advent) and, as we know, some Shi'ah scholars who held a high opinion about a certain number of their contemporary rulers have hinted at the possibility of the continuance of their dynasties until the appearance of the Mahdi.

On the whole, it is derived from the Qur'anic verses and the Islamic traditions that the rising of the Mahdi will be the last in the series of fights between the good and the evil which have continued from the very inception of the world. It will be the Mahdi who will give a concrete shape to the ideal of all the Prophets, the saints and the fighters in the way of Allah.

During the period of the occultation it is our duty to be expecting the Awaited Imam. We must devise a sound and judicious system of social development based on the holy Qur'an and present it to the world. We must prove the excellence and efficacy of Divine laws to the people and attract their attention to the Divine system we must fight superstitions and false beliefs and pave the way for the establishment of Islamic world government. In the light of the teachings of the holy Qur'an and traditions of the holy Prophet we must chalk out a programme for solving the world problems and put it at the disposal of world reformers. We must enlighten the thoughts of the people of the world and at the same time, prepare ourselves to receive the Awaited Imam and the emergence of a just world government.

1. For thousands of years man has been aspiring to delay death which is a predestined phenomenon. During the past centuries the efforts of the alchemists to find out an elixir of life ended in fiasco.

At the end of the nineteenth century scientific advancement revived the hope for a long life and it is possible that in the near future this sweet dream may turn into a reality. In this connection the scientists have resorted in the first instance to experiments on the animals.

For example, McKee, a distinguished expert of the Cornell University and Alex Komfort of London University have conducted experiments about the connection between food and senility. Alex Komfort was able, in the course of his experiments, to increase the age of a group of mice by fifty per cent. The results of the studies spread over four years conducted by Richard Rothschild, another American expert, regarding increase in the life of mice by the use of Methyl aminoethynol were published in the spring of 1972.

This scientist and his associate Akeep arrived at the conclusion that the use of Methyl aminoethynol during the period of the

experiment increased the life of the mice between 6 to 49 per cent. The experiment conducted on the mosquitoes increased their life upto 300 per cent.

[2.](#) It is not possible to ascertain directly that one phenomenon is the cause of the appearance of another phenomenon (like the rising of the sun being the cause of the earth becoming hot). We understand only this that one phenomenon (rising of the sun) is continually followed by another viz. the surface of the earth becoming hot.

It has also been observed that some events always taking place in succession to others is not limited to a special relationship of the phenomena but is a special feature of nature. However, neither the relationship of one single cause with its effect nor the generality of this relationship throughout nature is visible automatically and does not form an essential part of our thinking. (David Hume).

[3.](#) The number of Imam Sadiq's pupils has been reported upto four thousand, some of the well-known among them are: Abu Hanifah al-Nu'man b. Thabit, Abu Basir Yahya b. al-Qasim, Aban b. Taghlab, Ali b. Yaqteen, Abu Ja'far alias Mu'min al-Taq, Hisham b. Hakam, Harith b. Mughira, Hatim b. Isma'il, Jabir b. Hayyan, Malik b. Anas, Mufazzal b. Umar al-Kufi, (For details see: Al-Imam al-Sadiq wa'l mazahibul arba'ah, Asad Haydar, (Darul Kitab al-Arabia Beirut).

[4.](#) Al-Mahdi by Ayatullah Sayyid Sadruddin Sadr.

[5.](#) Muntakhab al-Athr fi Imam al-Thani 'Ashr by Lutfullah Safi.

[6.](#) Al-Fatawa al-Waziha 'by Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr.

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