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A Happy Dream

When presented for examination by people who are unfamiliar with the subject or those who are conversant yet in disagreement with the idea, the question of Mahdism may appear to be little more than idle-talk or rumour. Their conclusion may be that the idea is one based on fantasy or surmise, surrounded by a whole host of flaws and ambiguities. An example is the present, concealed existence of the Imam Mahdi (atfs) and the seemingly unnatural life-span accredited to him, the reasons for, and the qualities of his Occultation and the immediate triumph that he shall score after his eventual appearance.

Unfortunately, they count this among the numerous other false claims and flights of fancy that litter most religions and schools of thought.

Even if we suppose that this belief is nothing save hope and aspiration, it does, nevertheless, deserve investigation into its origins and ontological value. For whatever it may be, it has carved a deep niche in the hearts and lives of a whole nation, thus taking on historical and sociological importance. Therefore, it may prove interesting to discover from where and whom the roots of this conviction or habit have sprung, which person or persons have inspired and nourished it throughout history, and exactly how it has come to occupy such an import ant place. This constitutes, in itself, a separate chapter in the study of Islam and popular thought.

When comparing Islam with other major religions, we can see that it possesses a dearer and lucid history, with sacred scriptures and documents that were not only collected with greater meticulousity, but which have a more compiled form and more reliable sources. Therefore, the task of study and investigation is made considerably easier. One of the reasons for this is that Islam is the youngest of all religions; another is that it was introduced in the period when stylized writing as we know today was just becoming customary.

At the time of the Revelation in the Holy Quran, however, formal writing instruction was still a rarity in that part of the world. It was only after repeated recommendation and inducement made by Islam concerning the importance of knowledge and science, that the regular recording and registration of daily events, religious thoughts and sermons became commonplace. Subsequently, histories, narratives, Hadith and all intellectual discussions took on an academic and critical nature, giving rise to a wealth of

books dealing with Tafsir[1], hadith, religious narratives and countless works on social etiquette and morals. Later on, the sciences of Rijal and Derayeh came into being. They involved the examination into the validity of the chains of prophetic transmission – a process which entailed the methodical sorting and sifting of sayings and transmissions with regard to their eventual acceptance or rejection.

At the head of all these scriptures and documents is the Holy Qur'an itself, which acts as the infallible criterion for all other documentary evidence. It is the only religious book in existence which has not undergone any kind of impairment or corruption. Incidentally, the point is unanimously agreed upon by both its supporters and opponents. After the Qur'an, we have the texts of various sermons and prayers, such as Imam Ali (a)'s "Nahjul Balaghah" and the "Sahifa al-Sajjadiyyah" of the 4th Imam, Zaynul Abidin (a), the authenticity of which is beyond refute.

Continuing on, we come to the mass of books of Hadith of the Prophet and the Imams. Although the contents of this latter group are of a somewhat more scattered and inaccurate nature, the investigation into their authenticity or falsity is no Herculean task, especially for those who have a special insight into the subject and are willing to exert themselves in this particular field.

Just as these documents are used by orientalists as a basis for their research, the Shi'ites base their discriminations upon the criterion prescribed by the Imams, which states that "...any transmission which is related in our names must first be checked for compatibility with the Qur'an; if it is found to be contrary to the Holy Book, then it should be discarded."

Another means for separating the true narratives from the false is to take into consideration the actual value or benefit that society may derive from the narrative in question. However, if in the case of a Hadith whose interpretation could prove beneficial to one party and detrimental to the other, Shi'ite and Sunnite narrators are in accordance, then the degree of credibility of that particular narrative becomes considerably higher.

1. Tafsir – the exegetical commentary on the Quran and other religious scriptures.

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