

The
Awaited saviour



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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of Allah,
the Beneficent, the Merciful

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WHO AND WHAT OF IMAM AL MAHDI

The *Mahdi* is not only an embodiment of the Islamic belief but he is also the symbol of an aspiration cherished by mankind irrespective of its divergent religious doctrines. He is also the crystallization of an instructive inspiration through which all people, regardless of their religious affiliations, have learnt to await a day when heavenly missions, with all their implications, will achieve their final goal and the tiring march of humanity across history will culminate satisfactorily in peace and tranquility. This consciousness of the expected future has not been confined to those who believe in the supernatural phenomenon but has also been reflected in the ideologies and cults which totally deny the existence of what is imperceptible. For example, dialectical materialism which interprets history on the basis of contradiction believes that a day will come when all contradictions will disappear and complete peace and tranquility will prevail. Thus we find that this consciousness experienced throughout history is one of the widest and the commonest psychological experiences of humanity.

The religion when it endorses this common consciousness and stresses that in the long run this world will be filled with justice and equity after having been filled with injustice and oppression, gives it a factual value and converts it into a definite belief in the future course of humanity. This belief is not merely a source of consolation, but it is also a source of virtue

and strength. It is a source of virtue because the belief in the *Mahdi* means the total elimination of injustice and oppression prevailing in the world. It is a source of inexhaustible strength because it provides hope which enables man to resist frustration, howsoever hopeless and dismal the circumstances may be. The belief in the Appointed Day proves that it is possible for the forces of justice to face the world filled with injustice and oppression, to prevail upon the forces of injustice and to reconstruct the world order. After all prevalence of injustice, howsoever dominant and extensive it may become, is an abnormal state and must in the long run be eliminated. The prospect of its elimination after reaching its climax, infuses so great a hope in every persecuted individual and every oppressed nation that it is still possible to change the state of affairs.

UNIVERSALITY OF HIS BEING

Although the concept of the *Mahdi* is older than Islam, and is more widespread than the Muslim community, yet its detailed features as determined by Islam, meet more fully all the aspirations attached to it since the dawn of history. They are in greater conformity with the feelings and sentiments of the oppressed and the persecuted of all times. It is Islam which has given a concrete shape to an abstract idea. It is no longer necessary to look forward to an unknown saviour who may come into the world at a distant future. The saviour is already here, and we

simply have to look for the day when the circumstances are ripe for him to appear and begin his great mission. The *Mahdi* is no longer an idea. He is no longer a prophecy. We need not wait for his birth. He already exists actually, and we only wait for the inauguration of his role. He is a specific entity living among us in his real human form, and shares our hopes and disappointments, and our joys and griefs. He witnesses all the acts of oppression, persecution and injustice which are perpetrated on the face of the earth, and somehow or the others, he himself is affected by them. He is anxiously awaiting the moment when he will be able to extend his helping hand to everyone whom any wrong has been done, and be able to eradicate injustice and oppression completely.

Although this Awaited Leader is living among us, waiting for the Appointed Moment for his appearance, yet he is ordained not to proclaim himself nor to disclose his identity.

It is evident that the concept of the *Mahdi* with its Islamic features, shortens the gap between the oppressed and the expected saviour. It spans the bridge between them, howsoever long the period of waiting may be.

When we are asked to believe that the *Mahdi* is a particular person already living a normal life, we are expected to believe that the idea of absolute eradication of every kind of injustice and oppression by the *Mahdi* has already been embodied in the

person of the Awaited Leader who will appear while he will be, as the tradition say, 'Owing no allegiance to any tyrant'. The belief in him means a belief in this eradication of all evil in a concrete form.

The tradition urges the believers in the *Mahdi* to keep on waiting for him and to continue looking forward for solace. The idea is to establish a close spiritual and intuitive link between the believers, on the one hand, and the *Mahdi* and all that he stands for, on the other. It is not possible to establish such a link, without believing that the *Mahdi* has already been born and is a living and a contemporary personality.

Thus, we find that the concept of the living *Mahdi* has given a new impetus to the idea of an expected saviour. It has made it a source of effective strength and consolation to every person suffering from deprivation and injustice, a person who rejects all forms of tyranny because he feels that his Imam and Leader, being a contemporary and a living personality and not a future idea, shares his suffering and feels his misery.

Yet this concept, being beyond the imagination and comprehension of a number of people, has led them to adopt a negative attitude towards the very idea of the *Mahdi*.

SOME OBJECTIONS AND DOUBTS

LONGEVITY:— They object to the *Mahdi* being a

contemporary of so many successive generations during the past ten centuries and continuing to live until he reappears on the scene. How is it possible for him to live such a long life without being affected by the natural laws, according to which every one has to pass through the stages of old age and senility and eventually has to die at a time far earlier than the supposed present age of the *Mahdi*. Such a long life is impossible for a factual point of view.

SUSPENSION OF LAWS:— They also inquire as to why Allah is so keen to suspend natural laws for the sake of this particular person and to prolong his life so extraordinarily. Is humanity unable to produce any other competent leader? Why is it not possible that the role of filling the world with justice and equity be left to a leader who may be born on the eve of the Appointed Day and grow like other people?

LACK OF TRAINING:— They also say that if it is true that the *Mahdi* is the name of a particular person who is the son of the 11th Imam of the Prophet's House, born in 255 A.H., whose father died in 260 A.H. and who at the time of his father's death was a child of not more than five years of age. Obviously, this age is not sufficient for his being trained religiously and intellectually by his father. They ask how then has he been prepared for his great role.

DELAY IN APPEARANCE:— They also say that if the Leader is already prepared for the performance of his great role, then what is the necessity of waiting

for hundreds of years. Could not the upheavals and the social tragedies so far witnessed by the world justify his appearance on the scene?

HIS CONTINUED EXISTENCE:— They also say that even if it is presumed that the existence of the *Mahdi* is theoretically possible, how can they believe in his actual existence in the absence of any scientific or religious proof? For such a belief, a few traditions of unknown authenticity attributed to the holy Prophet cannot be considered to be enough.

HIS SUPERHUMAN ROLE:— With reference to the *Mahdi's* role, they ask how it is possible for one individual, howsoever great he may be, to play such a decisive role in the world, when it is known that no individual by himself can make history nor can he give it an entirely new turn. It is the prevailing circumstances which produce and direct historical changes. The greatness of an individual lies only in the coming to the fore-front, in the given circumstances, and in the practical change effecting by selecting one of the multiple solutions.

HIS MODUS OPERANDI:— They also ask what practical methods will be employed by that individual to bring about the colossal change and achieve the final victory of the forces of justice over the mighty and dominating forces of oppression and injustice, now having the most destructive weapons, scientific potentialities, political, social and military power at their disposal.

BACKGROUND OF OBJECTIONS

These are the questions which are frequently asked in this connection and repeated in form or another. They are not always motivated merely by intellectual curiosity. There are psychological reasons also which stimulate them. There is a strong general feeling that there is little chance of overthrowing the present world system, which is too powerful and invincible. This feeling produces skepticism and gives rise to queries. It leads to defeatism and an inferiority complex. One begins to shudder at the very idea of a world-wide change which may eliminate injustice and historical contradictions and usher in a new system based on justice and truth. This mental frustration impells one to doubt and reject every possibility of such a change by giving one reason or another.

We now propose to take up the above mentioned queries, one by one, and deal with them briefly within the limited space available.

REPLIES TO THE OBJECTIONS

It is possible for any human being to continue to live for many centuries, as is presumed in the case of this Awaited Leader who has already lived for more than 1140 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 or 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, a possibility of a thing may be of three categories, factual possibility, scientific possibility and the 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 though not practicable in the present circumstances, 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 so far, it has not been possible for anyone to go to that planet, 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 a higher temperature to a body having a lower temperature, till the temperature of both the bodies is at par.

Thus, we know that the scope of the logical possibi-

lity 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. With 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 the present and is earnestly trying to find an answer to it. For the present, there are more than one scientific explana-

tions of senility. Anyhow, if we accept the view that senile degeneration is caused by external influences, that means 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, as well as observations of the physicians, that many a men of advanced age still possesses 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.

In a nutshell, it is logically and scientifically possible that at present, 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* did attain such a long life before the scientists could 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 do so.

ISLAM FORESTALLS DISCOVERIES AND INVENTIONS

If the question is how Islam, which planned the age of this Leader, could anticipate science in this field, the answer is simple. This is not the only field where Islam has anticipated science. The Islamic Shari'ah (religious law) as a whole anticipated the scientific movement and the natural development of human thinking by several centuries. Islam has 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 has 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 the Divine Message (the holy Qur'an) has told us. For example, it tells us that the holy Prophet was carried at night from Masjid al Haram (at Mecca) to Masjid al Aqsa (at Jerusalem). This nocturnal journey, according to natural laws, represented such speed of movement as was made scientifically possible only hundreds of years afterwards. The same divine knowledge, which granted the holy Prophet this high speed long before science could achieve it, also granted his last divinely appointed successor, long before it could be realised by science.

SUSPENSION OF NATURAL LAWS

It is true that 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 the long life of the Awaited Saviour. Howsoever, unfamiliar though 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 precedence throughout history, there is no reason why we should not relish his long life unprecedented in our ordinary life.

We wonder if it is mere chance that each of the only two people 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 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 Noah who lived at least for about a thousand years and deny the *Mahdi*?

MIRACLE AND LONG LIFE

We have learnt that 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. Then what does this mean? It means only 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 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 holy Qur'an and the Sunnah.

The law of senility is not any the less 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'". (Sura Anbia: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. The holy Propht Muhammad (P) got out of his house, while it was surrounded by a mob of the tribe of the 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 also can be bracketed with these cases of suspension.

In this connection, we are usually confronted with the following question:

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, and determined 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.

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 causal nexus prevailed. According to the old theory, it was presumed that no phenomenon 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, 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 an exceptional state of the invariability of association for 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 certain 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.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HIS EXISTENCE

Now let us take up the question as to why Allah is so keen to prolong his life that for his sake, even natural laws are suspended. 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 of 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 and that the 12 Imams form an incomparable group and none of them can be replaced by any other individual. 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*.

On this basis, 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:

SCIENTIFIC BASIS OF HIS BEING

The proposed great revolutionary change requires that its leader should possess an 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 is psychologically to wage a war till victory is won.

It is evident that the size of this 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 is 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 had to 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 to the French monarchy.

It is reported that he, 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, brought up and had always lived under the shadow of a monarchy. But the man, having a long historical background and being full of the knowledge of historical factors knows fully well, how and when the prevailing culture and the prevailing system came into being and was developed. He knows that the historical age of cultures and systems, howsoever long, is very limited.

Have you read the Sura 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 Divine Unity? They felt greatly distressed and lost all hopes. 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 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 that 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 hundreds of years. The same privilege will be enjoyed by the Awaited Leader 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 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 benefitted 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 Leader 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 independent 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. In ensuring 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.

HIS TRAINING FOR THE MISSION

Now we come to the third question as to how the preparation of the Awaited Leader 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?

CHILDHOOD IMAMATE

The answer is that several of his forefathers also assumed the Imamate at an early age. Imam Muhammad ibn Ali al Jawad assumed it when he was only eight years old, Imam Ali ibn Muhammad al Hadi when he was nine, and Imam Abu Muhammad al Hasan al Askari, the father of the Awaited Leader, when he was 23.

It should be observed that the phenomenon of the early Imamate reached its zenith in the case of the Imam *Mahdi* and Imam Jawad. We call it a phenomenon because it assumed a tangible and practical form as in the case of several of the 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 more tangible or more convincing proof of it. The following points will elucidate what we mean:

(a) The Imamate of an Imam belonging to the Prophet's 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 Fatimide Caliphs and Caliphate of the Abbaside 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.

(b) The popular bases supporting the Imamate has existed since the early days of the Islamic year. They expanded further during the time of the Imams, al Baqir and al 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, commentators of the holy Qur'an and the learned in various fields of Islamic scholarship, and the humanities known at that time. Al Hasan ibn Ali al Washshe, when visiting the Masjid of Kufa found there 900 scholars all repeating the traditions narrated to them by Imam Ja'afar ibn Muhammad al Sadiq.

(c) The qualifications which an Imam possessed, as believed by this school and the popular bases represented by it, were very high. The Imam was judged by the standards 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 man of his time.

(d) 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.

(e) The Imams, whose Imamate these popular bases acknowledged, were not living in high towers isolated from their followers like kings. They never segregated themselves, except when imprisoned, exiled and forcibly kept aloof by the ruling junta. This we know for certain because of a large number of reporters who have narrated the sayings and deeds of each of the first 11 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 agents 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 Medina. All this meant a continuous contact between the Imam and their followers scattered all over the Muslim world.

(f) 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 of 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 fiction. It is certain that an Imam who

appears on the scene at a very early age, who proclaims himself to be the spiritual and intellectual leader of the Muslims and who is 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 the real worth and assessing his competence. Even if it is presumed that the people made no immediate effort 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 was 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 spiritual and intellectual leader. It may be difficult to prove the incompetence of a man of 40 or 50, but it would have been quite easy to prove the incompetence of an

ordinary child, howsoever intelligent he may be. 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 of why the government kept quiet and did not play this card, is that it had realised 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 of any occasion on which the child Imam vacillated or showed signs of such embarrassment that 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 exists parallel cases throughout the history of the heavenly mission and divine leadership. We cite just one instance. Allah had said: 'O John, hold fast the Book. And We granted him wisdom when a child.' (Sura Maryam: 12)

After it has been proved that the early Imamate is 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.

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 implications 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.

Answer:— The concept of the *Mahdi* as the Awaited Leader 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 reports on this subject found in the books of our Sunni brethren come to 400, and the total number of reports found in both the Shia and the Sunni sources come to more than 6,000. 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 12 Imams, 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 Leader and by the scientific argument, we prove that the *Mahdi* is not a mere myth but his existence is a fact proved by a 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 family, will be descended from his daughter Fatima and will be the descendent 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 12th Imam of the Prophet's House. The number of these traditions is very large in spite of the fact that the Imam's 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 was 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 Sunni and Shia books, such as al Bukhari, al Muslim, al Tirmizi, Abu Daud, Ahmad's Masnad

and al Hakim's Mustadrak. It may be noted that al Bukhari, who has quoted this tradition, was a contemporary of Imam Muhammad al Taqi Jawad, Imam Ali an Naqi 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 Imams, as believed by the Shia to reinforce their belief in the twelve Imams. This is because the suprious sayings attributed to the holy Prophet refer to the events which take place earlier and the saying comes afterwards. These 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 of his prophecy which was subsequently fulfilled by the actual number of the Imams beginning with Imam Ali and ending with the 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 70 years. This period is known as that of minor occultation. To elucidate the point, we propose to explain minor occultation briefly.

THE MINOR OCCULTATION

This represents the first stage of the Imamate of the Awaited Leader who was destined to keep himself hidden and 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 concealment 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 adopt 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 agents 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 Agent of the Imam. They are as under:

- (1) 'Usman ibn Sa'id al 'Umari
- (2) Muhammad ibn 'Usman
- (3) Abu al Qasim al Husayn ibn Ruh
- (4) Abu al Hasan ali ibn Muhammad al Sammari

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

The Agent was in contact with the Shia. 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 *Mahdi* during the tenure of his four Agents which lasted for about seventy years were in the same hand-writing and in the same style and bore the same signature.

Al Sammari was the last Agent. He announced the end of the stage of the minor occultation, the distinctive feature of which was the appointment of the particular Agents. It was turned into the major occultation after its object had been achieved and the Shia had gradually adopted 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 Agent. 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 experienced by a large number of people. He was represented by his Agents 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 70 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 out. 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 also to gain their confidence at the same time.

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

REASONS FOR HIS NON APPEARANCE

Why did the Leader not appear through 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 after, instead of converting it into the major occultation? At that 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 scientific industrial development.

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

As for 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 the holy Prophet Muhammad (P) 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 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 could have impeded his entry into that country, 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 to create the right climate and general atmosphere for its success. That is why there was a long gap of several hundreds 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 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 Nimrod did no harm to Abraham, the hand of the treacherous Jew who had drawn his sword to kill the holy Prophet Muhammad (P) was paralysed, a strong wind hit the camps of the infidels and the polytheists 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 revolutionise 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 a specific climate and a general atmosphere conducive to the fulfilment of all the pre-requisites.

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 distance 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 the world people 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.

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

We have explained somewhere else that history has two poles, one of them being man and the other, the material forces around him. Just as the material forces like the conditions of production influence man similarly man also influences the material forces around him. There is no justification for supposing that action always begins with the material and ends at man. The opposite can also be as true. In history, man and material have always been interacting. If the interacting force on 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.

THE LIBERATION FROM EVILS AND VICES AND FULFILMENT OF HIS MISSION

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 Imam *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 Imam *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 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, however, can be predicted safely that the Awaited Saviour will appear the moment the *stage* for his appearance is set, neither earlier nor later. Let us be clear as to the meaning of this *stage* for his appear-

ance. This *stage* means the prevailing conditions in the world and in human society. It means the decline in man's moral life, when oppression and tyranny will be rampant and when mankind would 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 their liberation. This will happen when wickedness will reach its climax. There would be a great upheavel, a great conflagration that will send this universe to its doom. In the darkness that would then prevail, there would dawn a new Sun in the form of the *Mahdi*, spreading light and lustre. Having liberated mankind from its misery and curse, the *Mahdi* would then bring about a transformation of life in which justice, peace, virtue and righteousness would abound. Thus would be 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* (God may hasten his solace) and as we know, some Shia 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.



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