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The Historical Perspective of Western Islamicists on the Subject of Mahdavisim

One of the conventional approaches in twentieth-century research methodology is that, in evaluating a given subject, its foundational principles and substance are examined from the perspective of its adherents; once the views of its loyalists and believers have been articulated, any perceived contradictions are pointed out. In contrast, most Western scholars of religion—particularly when examining the subject of Mahdavisim—initially regard it as an outgrowth influenced by the claims of pretenders and the fabrication of historical developments, adopting this preconception as a fundamental axiom. Subsequently, they investigate the functions and objectives this belief has pursued across historical and political transformations. Naturally, through this mode of inquiry, a significant portion of the subject's truth and validity remains unidentifiable, as it is impossible on this basis to fathom the status and significance of Mahdavisim within Islam and among its believers (Mousavi Gilani, ۲۰۰۰: p. ۱۲۰).

Most Western scholars of religion, in their study of Islam and Shi'ism, have paid scant attention to their fundamental components and core constituents. Without addressing the theological arguments of those who believe in the Promised Mahdi, they have contented themselves with recounting certain historical causes behind claims to the Mahdiyya. [۲] In order to understand profound doctrinal and creedal subjects, instead of consulting religious sources, they have restricted themselves to a historical perspective, proceeding to draw theological conclusions based upon it.

Proving Mahdavidism from the standpoint of historical documentary evidence—while offering certain potential merits—is a formidable task that demands deep, comprehensive research. While numerous compelling arguments may be adduced to substantiate this subject from a theological perspective, the scarcity of historical documentation or the contradiction posed by certain historical records creates severe constraints in the path of historical inquiry. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that there remains a conspicuous void for this type of research on Mahdavidism.

Jassim M. Hussain also points to this critical matter, writing: “From the first half of the fourth century (tenth century CE), many scholars examined the Occultation of the Imam solely from a doctrinal perspective, whereas this event appears to possess a historical dimension as well” (Hussain, ۱۹۹۸: p. ۲۰). Meanwhile, Orientalists and Western Islamicists—predominantly non-Muslims who have employed research methods such as historicism—have approached this vital subject from the vantage point of a non-believer. Without examining the grounds of belief in Mahdavidism from the perspective of its adherents, these researchers set out to delineate the causes of, and reasons why, the belief in Mahdavidism materialized in early Islam and the initial centuries. However, in such inquiries, a proper comprehension of doctrinal issues must precede any investigation of historical factors; otherwise, most views offered on matters of doctrine will lack fairness and balance. In other words, the primary error of this group is that they have investigated the “history of the belief” in Mahdavidism, rather than the “belief itself” in the Mahdi.

Helmer Ringgren and the Historical Evolution of the Term Mahdi

At the beginning of his article “Mahdism in Islam” (Ringgren, ۱۹۸۷: Vol. ۹, p. ۴۸۱), Ringgren points to the difficulty of the discussion, conceding that beliefs concerning the Mahdi cannot be fully understood in purely eschatological terms, and that comparing it to Jewish messianism or the concept of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ does not resolve the complexity of this subject within Islamic culture. Furthermore, it should not be considered unconventional, confined to a single sect, or merely a reflection of extremist views.

Nevertheless, he goes on to locate the emergence of the figure of the Mahdi in the wake of religious and political developments between the assassination of 'Uthman and the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him). He asserts that the belief in the Mahdi as a savior must have originated among ambitious and restless Arab groups who supported the claims of the 'Alids regarding the legitimate leadership of the community, and that this belief arose out of a specific set of socio-political conditions coupled with a distinct interpretation of Islamic revelation. In his view, this kind of spirituality and extraordinary doctrine could not have entered Islamic thought abruptly; rather, the term (Mahdi) first

appeared in ٦٨٦ CE with the Shi'i rebellion of al-Mukhtar in Kufa. Al-Mukhtar launched propaganda on behalf of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya and founded the Kaysanite movement. This Mahdi was regarded as an eschatological and prophetic figure who had vanished from human sight and was living miraculously in a paradisiacal state until his expected re-emergence.

Ringgren further cites broader Shi'i movements during the first three centuries in which the title Mahdi was repeatedly assumed by various 'Alid claimants, such as Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, or 'Ubayd Allah, the founder of the Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty in North Africa, as well as the application of the epithet al-Mahdi to the 'Abbasid caliph. He also speaks of another Shi'i faction that was no less official than other groups, yet refrained from taking part in any uprising or political movement. These were the "Husaynid 'Alids," who placed the expectation of the future savior at the center of their doctrines and refrained from using the term Mahdi as a title for themselves, referring instead to designations such as the Imam, the Riser (Qa'im), or the Guide of the Rightly Guided (Hadi al-Muhtadin).

The Historical Evolution of the Term Mahdi According to Wilferd Madelung

Madelung, author of the article "al-Mahdī" (Madelung, ١٩٨٦: Vol. ٥, p. ١٢٣٠), maintains that this term was employed from early Islam as an honorific title without carrying messianic (eschatological) implications. Thus, Hassan ibn Thabit used it for the Prophet, and Jarir applied it to Abraham. Sulayman ibn Surad, following the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him), referred to him as "the Mahdi, son of the Mahdi," and al-Farazdaq, in a panegyric, described al-Walid as the sixth of the six 'Abd Shams caliphs descended from 'Uthman, all of whom were among the "rightly guided guides" (hudat mahdiyyin). Madelung considers the internal strife following the death of Mu'awiya to be the inception of applying the term Mahdi to an expected ruler who would restore Islam to its pristine perfection. Then, like many Orientalists, he regards al-Mukhtar's initiative in presenting Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya as the Mahdi as the beginning of the messianic understanding of the word Mahdi, writing: Among the Umayyad caliphs, Sulayman (٩٦–٩٩ AH / ٧١٥–٧١٧ CE) appears to have been the first caliph to promote this belief. In the panegyrics of Jarir and al-Farazdaq, he was frequently styled as the Mahdi in this sense. Jarir likewise designated 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz and Hisham as the Promised Mahdi. Meanwhile, a concerted effort was undertaken to counter the claims of the Kufans that the Promised Mahdi would hail from the 'Alids. Hence, it was attributed to Imam al-Baqir (peace be upon him) that: "The Prophet of Islam is from us, and the Promised Mahdi is from Banu 'Abd Shams; we consider him to be none other than 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz" (Ibn Sa'd, ١٩٩٣ [١٤١٤ AH]: Vol. ٥, p. ٢٤٥).

The author of the article further highlights a subtle point, noting that Tawus ibn Kaysan (d. ١٠٦ AH / ٧٢٤ CE) remarked: The second 'Umar ('Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz) was rightly guided, but he is not the Promised Mahdi (kāna mahdiyyan wa-laysa bihi), for during the time of the Promised Mahdi, the reward for the good deeds of the righteous will surpass them, and evildoers will be called to repentance. According to Madelung, al-Hasan al-Basri held that the Mahdi was none other than Jesus himself, yet if there were to be a Mahdi, it would be the second 'Umar. However, Muhammad ibn Sirin, his contemporary and rival in religious

authority, maintained that the Mahdi would arise from the Islamic community (ummah) and that Jesus, after descending from heaven, would pray behind him (Madelung, ۱۹۸۶: Vol. ۵, p. ۱۲۳۰).

Concerning certain sects that claimed the Mahdiyya, he writes: Among the Isma'ilis prior to the Fatimids, both the terms Mahdi and Qa'im were applied to the messianic Imam (the Awaited Promised One), akin to their usage in Shi'ism. Following the rise of the Fatimids, it was believed that certain prophecies regarding the Mahdi had been fulfilled by the Fatimid caliph al-Mahdi, the founder of the dynasty, while the remainder would be fulfilled by his successors (W. ۱۹۴۲: pp. ۹۷–۱۲۲). From then on, the designation Mahdi was reserved exclusively for the first Fatimid caliph, whereas the Imam associated with the eschatological concept was designated solely as the Qa'im. Among the Zaydis, who did not elevate the nature of the Imams to a superhuman level, hopes concerning the Mahdi were generally weak and marginal. Certain Zaydi groups, such as the Jarudiyya, awaited the return of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, Muhammad ibn al-Qasim, the leader of Talaqan (۲۱۹ AH / ۸۳۴ CE), or Yahya ibn 'Umar. However, no trace of their views survived in the mainstream Zaydi tradition. The Waqifiyya, likewise, following the demise of the seventh Imam (Musa al-Kazim), declared him the Mahdi and awaited his return. In subsequent periods and prior to the Occultation of the twelfth Imam—whom most Imami Shi'is recognized as the Mahdi following the death of Hasan ibn 'Ali al-'Askari (peace be upon him) (۲۶۰ AH / ۸۷۴ CE)—the doctrine of the Occultation had already been firmly established by the traditions of the Imams.

Robert S. Kramer and the Historical Evolution of the Term Mahdi

Robert S. Kramer, author of the article “al-Mahdī” (Kramer, ۱۹۹۵: p. ۱۸), after referencing the claim put forward concerning Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya by al-Mukhtar, notes that other such episodes exist in Shi'i history. They designated the twelfth Imam, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-'Askari (peace be upon him), who went into concealment in ۸۷۸ CE, as the Mahdi. Consequently, the belief in a messianic savior (the Awaited Mahdi) emerged—one who would return one day to champion the cause of his partisans. He refers to the exploitation of traditions concerning the Mahdi by diverse factions, asserting that various claimants to the Mahdiyya cited an immense and burgeoning number of prophetic hadiths regarding the Mahdi to validate their claims; given that these hadiths diverge on numerous particulars, they possess a broad degree of adaptability. He contends that the writings of Sufi-inclined scholars, notably Ibn 'Arabi (d. ۱۲۴۰ CE), served as significant factors in disseminating Mahdist thought. In his assessment, the vast number of Mahdi claimants across Islamic history testifies to the widespread public reception of Mahdist ideology. He cites several examples of claimants to the Mahdiyya: 'Ubayd Allah (۹۳۴ CE), the first Fatimid caliph, attained power in North Africa by capitalizing on Shi'i sentiments and doctrines; Muhammad ibn Tumart (d. ۱۱۳۰ CE), founder of the twelfth-century Almohad reformist movement, likewise claimed to be the Mahdi; and in the thirteenth century AH (۱۸۷۵ to ۱۸۸۳ CE), at least three leaders of reformist movements in West Africa—Shaykh 'Uthman Dan Fodio of Sokoto, Shaykh Ahmadu Barry of Masina, and al-Hajj 'Umar Tall of the

Toucouleur Empire—leveraged the Mahdist inclinations of the populace for their jihads (Kramer, ١٩٩٥: p. ١٨).

Abdulaziz Sachedina's Assessment of the Historical Evolution of the Term Mahdi

Abdulaziz Sachedina, in his article "Mahdī" (Sachedina, ١٩٩٥: p. ٩٥), offers a concise survey of the trajectory of Mahdist thought in Islamic history, writing: From the time the first Islamic polity was established by the Prophet of Islam in Medina in ٦٢٢ CE, an indissoluble link between divine appointment (prophethood) and the establishment of an Islamic global order became an integral element of Mahdist doctrines in Islam. Consequently, by virtue of his appointment as the heir to the Prophet and the vicegerent of God, the Mahdi is expected to realize this sublime ideal on earth. According to him, during the first century AH, historical and sociological factors following the demise of the Prophet (٦٣٢ CE) exerted a profound influence in intensifying Mahdist hopes and expectations. The Shi'is, having been subjected to persecution, fell into deep despair after the caliphate was removed from the Banu Hashim in ٦٦١ CE; nevertheless, hope in a justice-dispensing leader was emphasized in a distinctive manner. Although 'Ali (peace be upon him) and his son Husayn (peace be upon him) were conceived in terms of the non-eschatological (messianic) concept of the Mahdi, Muhammad ibn al-Hanafīyya was presented as the Promised Mahdi (Sachedina, ١٩٩٥: p. ٩٥).

He considers the outbreak of civil wars to have been instrumental in generating Mahdist thought, regarding the divergence among Shi'is over the identification of the Mahdi as the primary driver behind the splintering of diverse Shi'i sects. As he puts it, awaiting the arrival of one who will fill the world with justice and equity is not merely a hope for the future; rather, it constitutes a form of reappraisal across every period of social and historical life. Each generation, for one reason or another, assumed that the Mahdi might emerge during their own era. Consequently, Mahdist tendencies served as catalysts for heterodox and even militant attitudes among the Shi'is. The ruling powers, apprehensive of these revolutionary uprisings, suppressed them ruthlessly. One of the most significant of these uprisings aligned with Mahdism was the 'Abbasid revolution in the eighth century CE. Likewise, the Fatimid revolution in the tenth century CE, which culminated in the establishment of a state in North Africa, utilized Shi'i ideology and even the title al-Mahdi; yet not all Shi'i endeavors proved successful. Successive failures and the disillusionment of the adherents of Mahdist prophecies gradually shifted the emphasis from the Mahdi as a political power toward religious reform. From then on, the title Mahdi no longer denoted immediate and direct political action, but was instead perpetuated within the framework of esoteric teachings. In works encompassing esoteric Mahdist knowledge and future cataclysms (malāhim wa-fitan), traditions are recorded in which every generation of Muslims perceives its own tribulations and aspirations reflected (Sachedina, ١٩٩٥: p. ٩٥).

Within Twelver Shi'ism—which affirms that the twelfth Imam resides in occultation and is himself the Promised Mahdi—an active political outlook summons believers to remain continually prepared and vigilant so as to take part in a great revolution alongside the Mahdi, whose re-emergence may occur at any moment. Nevertheless, at the inception of

the millennium following the occultation of the twelfth Imam (۸۷۴ CE), in ۱۸۴۴ CE, 'Ali Muhammad declared himself the Bab (Gate) to the Mahdi; subsequently, in ۱۸۶۳ CE, the Baha'i Faith was proclaimed by Baha'u'llah, incorporating the social mission of the Babis. In recent years, hadiths concerning Mahdavisism regarding the foretelling of end-times events have invigorated Muslim hopes in connection with the Islamic Revolution of Iran in ۱۹۷۸–۱۹۷۹ and the Persian Gulf Crisis in ۱۹۹۰ (Sachedina, ۱۹۹۵: p. ۹۵).

Timothy R. Furnish's Views on the Historical Evolution of the Term Mahdi

Timothy Furnish, in the entry "Mahdism" under the heading Islam (Furnish, ۲۰۰۰: p. ۱۸۷), provides an overview of Islamic history and identifies four movements among the uprisings grounded in Mahdism that were particularly successful (the 'Abbasids, the Fatimids, the Almohads, and the Sudanese Mahdi). He maintains that 'Abbasid propagandists claimed the station of Mahdiyya for their rulers, soliciting Shi'i support to undermine the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus. Once ensconced in power, the 'Abbasid caliphs abandoned their claims to the Mahdiyya, although some continued to append the epithet al-Mahdi to their names.

The other three groups, however, applied the title Mahdi in an eschatological (messianic) sense and did not confine themselves merely to the political exploitation of the word Mahdi to establish rule. At the conclusion of this section, Furnish points to the Islamic Revolution of Iran, asserting that some believed Imam Khomeini was the Hidden Imam who had re-emerged, though he himself never laid claim to such a title. Furnish concludes his article with the following statement: "As history bears witness, the world has now entered a new century and millennium; yet Mahdism continues to endure as a potent and potentially powerful oppositional ideology throughout the Islamic world" (Furnish, ۲۰۰۰: p. ۱۸۷).



Mahdavisism from the Perspective of Orientalists

Orientalism—derived from the root Orient, meaning the East—refers to the endeavors and scholarship of Western scholars concerning Eastern culture, encompassing elements such as language, literature, art, customs, intellectual currents, beliefs, and traditions. The objectives of Orientalists have varied considerably: some embarked on journeys to the East with proselytizing motives to propagate Christianity; others operated under colonial agendas aimed at political and cultural hegemony; while a third group was driven purely by scientific curiosity and an earnest desire to acquire knowledge. The principal subject of Orientalist inquiry regarding Islam has been the Holy Qur'an and related fields—such as the chronology of revelation, compilation, codification, translation, and exegesis—which constitute the bulk of their literature.

Because the majority of Orientalists were non-Muslims (predominantly Christian or Jewish), their encounter with the religious culture of the East, namely Islam, was frequently unobjective. Consequently, the articles and treatises they produced on Islam and the Qur'an

often presented a flawed, distorted, and uncharitable portrayal. Today, these written works serve as primary references for instruction and research across chairs of Islamic studies in European universities.

Muslim scholars have adopted two contrasting stances toward the Orientalist tradition. One group has lavishly praised their contributions, regarding them as pioneers of rigorous methodology in religious textual criticism and as restorers of Eastern heritage to the West. Conversely, another group has vehemently condemned their efforts, contending that Orientalism emerged according to a premeditated agenda designed to desecrate sacred values and undermine Islamic convictions.

Fairness and academic integrity, however, dictate that scholars avoid broad generalizations and not dismiss the constructive contributions of some due to the distortions of others. It is necessary to acknowledge the valuable efforts of Orientalists in cataloging, preserving, editing, and publishing Islamic manuscripts, standardizing Qur'anic concordances, and formulating modern methodological frameworks for analyzing religious texts based on advancements in the humanities. Concurrently, one must remain vigilant regarding instances of bias, textual manipulation, misinterpretation, distortion of Qur'anic teachings, and reliance on weak traditions, folklore, superstitions, spurious narratives, and fabricated reports.

Among the enduring and universal teachings of Islam, none holds as much potential for contemporary discourse as the universal Mahdavi governance—a governance that promises justice and security for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Western scholars have examined the subject of Mahdavisim from diverse perspectives:

۱. Historical Perspectives: In analyzing Islamic history from its inception to the modern era, some scholars focused on figures who led uprisings and established political authorities in the name of the Mahdi, such as the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt (founded by al-Mahdi bi-Allah) or the Sudanese Mahdist movement of the ۱۹th century against British colonial rule.

۲. Doctrinal and Philosophical Perspectives: Other scholars investigated Shi'i theology, focusing on the Occultation (Ghaybah) of Imam Mahdi and the doctrine of Anticipation (Intizar). Professor Henry Corbin, for instance, devoted a significant portion of his dialogues with Allameh Tabataba'i to this subject.

۳. Comparative Religious Perspectives: Certain researchers examined messianism as a common denominator among Abrahamic and world religions, delineating the distinct features of the Islamic Promised Savior in comparison to other eschatological traditions.

While some Orientalists dismissed Mahdavisim as mere mythology resulting from the assimilation of ancient Iranian and Zoroastrian lore into Islam, others evaluated it positively, recognizing it not as a myth, but as an empowering and constructive pillar of Islamic—particularly Shi'i—thought.

In his work *The Politics of Islam*, the German scholar Marbin observes regarding the philosophy of Shi'ism at the conclusion of chapter seven:

“Among the most vital social tenets capable of continually generating hope and salvation is the belief in the existence of a Living Proof (Hujjah) in every age and the anticipation of his advent”.

“Shi'ism maintains that when an individual retires to bed at night, they should do so with the expectation that upon waking in the morning, should the Proof of the Age have appeared, they must be fully prepared to assist him; and they believe that all nations and governments across the globe will ultimately submit to his authority”.

“It is as though every Shi'i individual awakens each morning with the aspiration for the advancement, universal reach, and ascendancy of their faith. Shi'is regard the jurists (mujtahids) as the general deputies (nuwwab 'amm) of the Proof of the Age. It is evident to sociologists that when such a conviction permeates the consciousness of an entire nation, the material and natural conditions for its realization will inevitably follow”.

“Despair and privation are the roots of all humiliation and misery, whereas their antithesis provides enduring reassurance. Hope and fortitude grounded in deep conviction serve as the ultimate foundation for deliverance and salvation”.

Analyzing the perspectives of Western Orientalists on Mahdavidism enables scholars to observe the doctrine from an external vantage point and identify analytical nuances that may be overlooked within traditional internal scholarship. Scholars such as Edward Granville Browne, Marbin, Gerlof van Vloten, and Henry Corbin represent key figures whose research addressed the critical dimensions of Mahdavidism.



Mahdavidism from the Perspective of Western Scholars of Religion and Islamic Studies

The term *messianism* is derived from the word *messiah*, which translates the Hebrew term *māšîaḥ* ("the anointed one"). It originally denoted a king whose reign was consecrated through the ritual of anointing with oil. In the Jewish sacred scriptures (the Old Testament), *māšîaḥ* is consistently used to refer to the ruling king of Israel: in the case of King Saul (۱ Sam. ۱۲:۳-۵; ۲۴:۷-۱۱), King David (۲ Sam. ۱۹:۲۱-۲۲), King Solomon (۲ Chron. ۶:۴۲), or the king in general (Psalms ۲:۲; ۱۸:۵۰; ۲۰:۶; ۲۸:۸; ۸۴:۹; ۸۹:۳۸; ۸۹:۵۱; ۱۳۲:۱۷). In the intertestamental period, however, the term came to be applied to a future king who was expected to restore the kingdom of Israel and deliver the people from all evil.

At the same time, although the prophetic oracles concerning the ideal future king do not explicitly employ the word *messiah*, they have nonetheless been classified among eschatological predictions of this very nature. These passages include Isaiah ۹:۱-۶; ۱۱:۱-۹; Micah ۵:۲-۶; Zechariah ۹:۹; and certain "royal psalms" such as Psalms ۲, ۷۲, and ۱۱۰. The precedent for this latter concept is found in the royal ideologies of the ancient Near

East, wherein the monarch functioned as the savior of his people, and each successive ruler was expected to usher in fertility, wealth, freedom, peace, and prosperity for his realm. Parallels may be identified in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. The French scholar Édouard Dhorme (1910) cited several texts that articulated such expectations under the designation of the “Messiah King” [see also: *Kingship*, an entry on kingship in the ancient Mediterranean world].

Judaism: In the Judaism of the intertestamental period, messianic expectations developed along two distinct trajectories. The first was national and political in character, finding its clearest expression in the *Psalms of Solomon* (chs. 17 and 18). Here, this national messiah is a Son of David. He will rule with wisdom and justice, vanquish the great world powers, liberate his people from foreign subjugation, and establish a universal sovereignty in which humanity will dwell in peace and prosperity. The same royal ideal is articulated in the description of Simon’s reign in 1 Maccabees 14:3ff, reflecting Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah.

Certain pseudepigraphal writings, notably the *Testament of Levi*, also speak of a priestly messiah who is to bring peace and divine knowledge to his people and the world. The Qumran community even anticipated two anointed figures—a priest and a king—though little is known concerning their specific functions.

The second trajectory of this development is found preeminently in the Ethiopic *Apocalypse of Enoch* (1 Enoch) and in 2 Esdras (also designated 3 Ezra). Its primary focus centers upon the expression “the Son of Man.” In the Old Testament, this phrase is used predominantly to denote a human being (Psalms 8:4; 80:17 [v. 18 in traditional verse counts]; and repeatedly as an address to the prophet in the Book of Ezekiel). In the vision recorded in Daniel 7, the phrase is employed in verse 13 to designate “one like a son of man” who, in contrast to the four conventional beasts representing the four great empires of antiquity, signifies the prominent role of Israel on the Day of Judgment.

In these apocalypses, the Son of Man is a non-material, more or less divine, and pre-existent figure who remains presently hidden in heaven. In the end times, he will appear to execute judgment among all peoples in connection with the resurrection of the dead. The faithful will be delivered from demonic dominion, and he will rule the world forever in peace and justice. In these writings, he is frequently designated as the “Elect One” and only occasionally referred to as the “Anointed One”—that is, the Messiah. Evidently, this interpretation of Daniel 7:13 applies the “Son of Man” to an individual figure rather than to a term of comparison. The fundamental difficulty lies in determining the extent to which these texts predate Christianity. 2 Esdras was certainly composed after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, and those sections of 1 Enoch that contain references to the Son of Man are absent from the Aramaic fragments of the work discovered at Qumran. On the other hand, the New Testament appears to presuppose this very interpretation of Daniel 7:13.

Christianity: Early Christianity adopted many Jewish conceptions of the Messiah and applied them to Jesus Christ. The Hebrew *māšîaḥ* was translated into Greek as *Christos* (Christ), thereby identifying Jesus Christ with the messianic expectations of Judaism. The Gospel of Matthew interprets the passage in Isaiah 9:1 (English version, 9:2)—“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light”—as having found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Matt. 4:14–18). Micah 5:1 (English version, 5:2) is cited to confirm that the Messiah was

to be born in Bethlehem (Matt. ٢:٦). Zechariah ٩:٩ is interpreted as foretelling Jesus Christ's entry into Jerusalem (Matt. ٢١:٥); if the narrative related by Matthew is historically accurate, it implies that Jesus Christ deliberately sought to present himself as the Messiah.

Psalm ٢:٧ ("You are my son") is cited, or at least alluded to, in connection with the baptism of Jesus Christ (Matt. ٣:١٧; Mark ١:١١; Luke ٣:٢٢)—notwithstanding that in Judaism the Messiah was not regarded as the literal Son of God. Psalm ١١٠:١ is employed to demonstrate that the Messiah cannot merely be the Son of David (Matt. ٢٢:٤٤); other sections of Psalm ١١٠ substantiate the theological expositions in Hebrews ٥, ٦, and ٧. However, the New Testament explicitly repudiates the political messianism articulated in the *Psalms of Solomon*. Jesus Christ refused temporal kingship (John ٦:١٥); standing before Pilate, he declared: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John ١٨:٣٦ [cited in source as ١٨:٢٦]). Nevertheless, he was formally accused of claiming to be the "King of the Jews" (John ١٩:١٩).

However, although the New Testament affirms that the Messiah is the Son of God, it also employs the designation "the Son of Man." According to the Gospels, Jesus Christ applied this expression to himself, which in several instances likely meant simply "human being" or "this man" (Mark ٢:١٠; Matt. ١١:١٩ [cited in source as ١١:٨], and parallels; Matt. ٨:٢٠, and parallels). Several passages refer to the coming of the Son of Man in the end times (Matt. ٢٤:٢٧, ٣٧; Luke ١٨:٨ [cited in source as ١٨:١٨, ٢٣, ٦٩]; Matt. ١٠:٢٣; Mark ١٣:٢٦). These reflect the very same interpretation of Daniel ٧:١٣ found in ١ Enoch and ٢ Esdras, but they incorporate an additional element: that it is Jesus Christ who will return a second time as the Judge of all humanity.

A third group of sources concerning the "Son of Man" alludes to the suffering and death of Christ, at times also raising the theme of his resurrection (Mark ٨:٣١; ٩:٩, ٣١; ١٠:٣٣; ١٤:٢١ [cited twice in source], ٤١; Luke ٢٢:٤٨, etc.). These verses introduce the concept of the suffering Messiah, a notion not entirely unfamiliar in Jewish messianism, yet never associated with the Son of Man. (Even if the Jewish Son of Man was occasionally described as the "servant of God," the chapter concerning the Suffering Servant in Isaiah ٥٣ was never applied to him.) In the Gospel of John, the Son of Man is in most instances a divine figure depicted as king and judge, while also conceived as a pre-existent being in heaven (John ١:٥١; ٣:١٣–١٤ [cited in source as ٣:٢٣]; ٨:٢٨). Hebrews ٢:٦–٨ interprets Psalm ٨—where "son of man" originally signified "human being"—as a reference to Jesus Christ, thereby conferring an eschatological meaning upon the phrase.

By identifying the Suffering Servant of Isaiah ٥٣ with Jesus Christ, a new feature was introduced into New Testament messianism. In Mark ٩:١٢, it is stated that "it is written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt" (cf. Isa. ٥٣:٣). Acts ٨:٣٢ explicitly identifies the subject of Isaiah ٥٣:٧–٨ with Jesus Christ, and ١ Peter ٢:٢٢–٢٤ cites or alludes to portions of Isaiah ٥٣ as referring to him. This identification appears to have constituted the foundational bedrock of early Christology (or possibly the emergence of the early Church).

Thus, New Testament Christology draws upon a great number of features derived from Jewish messianism. At the same time, it adds a new dimension: the perspective that although the Messiah has already personally fulfilled messianic expectations, he is destined to return in order to bring these hopes to their ultimate consummation.

Messianism (Mahdavisim) in Islam

Beliefs analogous to the Second Coming of Christ can also be found in Islam, possibly as a result of Christian influence. Although the Qur'an presents God as the Judge on the Day of Resurrection, subsequent Islamic traditions introduce specific preliminary events that are to occur prior to that Day. Muhammad is reported to have said that, even if only a single day remained of the world's existence, it would be prolonged so that a ruler from the Prophet's Household (Ahl al-Bayt) might arise and defeat all the enemies of Islam.

This ruler is named the Mahdi, meaning "the one guided to the truth." Other traditions state that he will fill the earth with justice and equity just as it is presently filled with sin, an image that clearly reflects ancient royal ideology. Some identify the Mahdi with the Messiah—Jesus (*'Isa* in Arabic)—who is expected to appear before the end of time and destroy the Dajjal (the Deceiver), the false Messiah, or the Antichrist. These traditions have been utilized by founders of new ruling dynasties and by other political or religious leaders, particularly among the Shi'ah. One of the latest examples was the rebel leader Muhammad Ahmad of Sudan, who, from ۱۸۸۳ onward, temporarily eliminated British influence in the region.

Nativistic Movements

For several reasons, the concept of messianism has been applied to describe various "nativistic" cults across different parts of the world that emerged in the wake of conflicts between colonial Christianity and indigenous religions. However, following Vittorio Lanternari (۱۹۶۵), a distinction must be drawn between messianic movements and prophetic movements. As he notes: "The 'messiah' is the expected savior, and the 'prophet' is the one who announces the coming of the one who is to arrive. The prophet himself may become the 'messiah' after his death and be expected to return as a savior; alternatively, the prophet himself, drawing upon an earlier messianic myth, may proclaim himself the messianic prophet" (p. ۲۴۲, n. ۱).

Examples of such movements are evident across indigenous regions of the world. As early as the sixteenth century, successive waves of Tupi tribes in Brazil migrated to the coast of Bahia in search of the "Land Without Evil," an endeavor rooted in messianic beliefs. It is said that another such migration in search of the "Land of Immortality and Eternal Rest" led to the emergence of the El Dorado legend among the Spanish. Similar migrations occurred in subsequent centuries under the leadership of a type of prophet described as a "man-god" or "demigod"—referring to indigenous tribal shamans who were regarded by the natives as religious leaders, reincarnations of great mythical culture heroes in indigenous tradition, and heralds of an era of renewal.

The Ghost Dance movement in the American West was founded in ۱۸۷۹ by an individual named Wodziwob. He experienced visions through which the Great Spirit announced that a catastrophic event would soon shake the entire world and destroy the white people; the Native Americans would be resurrected, and the Great Spirit would dwell among them in a paradisiacal age. Wodziwob's son, Wovoka (Jack Wilson), established ties with the Mormons in ۱۸۹۲, and they regarded him as the messiah of the Native Americans and the Son of God.

In the Congo region of Africa, Simon Kimbangu, who had been raised in the British Baptist Missionary Society, appeared before his people in ۱۹۲۱ as a prophet. His preaching was a syncretism of Christian and indigenous elements. He foretold the imminent overthrow of foreign rulers, a new way of life for Africans, and the arrival of a golden age. Both he and his successor, André Matsoua, believed that they would return after death as saviors of their people. Several other similar movements are known in other parts of Africa.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Melanesia and New Guinea witnessed the emergence of cults known as cargo cults. The common belief among all of them was that a Western ship (or even an airplane), carrying white passengers, would arrive and bring wealth to the indigenous population; simultaneously, the dead would be resurrected, and an era of joy would ensue. Certain prophets of these cults were regarded as reincarnated spirits [see also the entry: *Cargo Cults*]. It appears that all these movements arose among oppressed peoples and expressed their yearning for liberation and improved conditions of life. The historical conditions in which Christianity emerged were certainly comparable, at least in some respects, to those that gave rise to such movements.



Henry Corbin and the Question of Mahdavidism

Henry Corbin (۱۹۰۳–۱۹۷۸) is among the most prominent Orientalists who spent many years of his life in Iran, conducting research in Iranian studies, Islamic studies, Islamic mysticism (*'Irfan*), and Islamic philosophy, and founding the French Institute of Iranian Studies in Iran (*Institut Français de Recherche en Iran*). He studied under great Western and Islamic thinkers to comprehend Islamic mysticism and philosophy. After years of endeavoring to understand Shi'i thought, he translated and authored outstanding works on Shi'i mysticism, philosophy, and theology in French. His corpus of works is estimated at approximately ۱۹۷ titles, some of which remain unparalleled in their respective domains.^۱

The culmination of Corbin's studies and efforts—carried out in collaboration with several Iranian scholars—was the compilation of a collection of mystical and philosophical works by great Iranian figures entitled the *Bibliothèque Iranienne* (*Ganjineh-ye Neveshteh-ha-ye Irani*), of which ۲۲ volumes were published during his lifetime. Corbin's writings on Islamic mysticism and philosophy reflect his primary intellectual concerns.^۲ Unlike many Orientalists who write about Eastern and Islamic culture with superficial study and based on mere conjecture, Corbin wrote with rigorous and extensive research on Islamic civilization, particularly Shi'i culture. An examination of his works demonstrates his deep erudition in Islamic culture; few Orientalist scholars can match his intellectual depth and comprehensiveness.

Corbin did not consider himself an Orientalist; rather, he viewed himself as a peripatetic philosopher searching everywhere and inquiring of everyone in pursuit of what he had lost. Regarding this, he states:

"My training was philosophical from the beginning. For this reason, I am neither a specialist in German language and culture in the strict sense, nor an Orientalist. I am a philosopher

on a quest, led wherever my path takes me. Although this spiritual and intellectual journey has brought me to Freiburg, Tehran, and Isfahan, these cities are, to me, allegorical cities—symbolic stations of a perpetual and enduring journey."^۳

It can certainly be asserted that Henry Corbin is among the few Orientalists who offered novel insights into Mahdavidism. When approaching this subject, he examines it systematically and organically in conjunction with other Shi'i foundations and principles, rather than treating it merely as an isolated doctrine. Some Orientalists—and even certain Islamic scholars—when addressing Mahdavidism, neglect its connection to other doctrines and its influence on other pillars of religious law (*Shari'ah*) and theological teachings; instead, they abstract Mahdavidism from the matrix of religious teachings and examine it analytically rather than synthetically and organically. Yet, in addition to its intrinsic importance within the system and corpus of a tradition, a concept can occupy an exceptional and unique position. The relation of Mahdavidism to religion is analogous to that of the heart to the body: while it can be analyzed independently, its function and significance in relation to other religious doctrines must also be addressed. It is only through such an organic analysis that the role and weight of Mahdavidism become evident even in the minute components of religion.

The question of Mahdavidism—which represents the Seal of Muhammadan Guardianship (*Khatm al-Wilayah al-Muhammadiyah*)—stands at the highest peak of Corbin's scholarly discourse in the sphere of Shi'i mysticism. By understanding the full range of Corbin's intellectual components in describing Islamic mysticism and esoteric Shi'ism, one recognizes Mahdavidism as the most vital dimension of his conceptual framework. Just as the apex of mystical discourse (such as the mystics' exposition of the *Haqiqah Muhammadiyah* or Muhammadan Reality) centers on the issue of Muhammadan and Mahdavi Guardianship (absolute and restricted *Wilayah*), and denying this summit leads to the collapse of the foundations of mysticism and the Muhammadan Reality, it can likewise be maintained that Mahdavidism serves as the central pillar throughout the works and intellectual endeavors of this great Orientalist. It is as though, across all his investigations—including Isma'ilism, the mysticism of Ibn 'Arabi and Sayyid Haydar Amoli, Suhrawardi's Illuminationist (*Ishraqi*) philosophy, the Shaykhi school, and Twelver Shi'ism—he consistently keeps his sight on the core axis: Mahdavidism. A survey of Corbin's works on mystical and Shi'i culture, comprising dozens of volumes, reveals that he considered any analysis of mysticism and Shi'ism incomplete without the question of Mahdavidism. He views the advent of the Mahdavi rule as the manifestation and unveiling of the esoteric dimension (*batin*) of all Abrahamic religions, stating:

"Ultimately, the advent of the Twelfth Imam (the Mahdi, the Hidden Imam), which will occur at the end of our time, will unveil all the hidden secrets of the divine revelations."^۴

In explicating Islamic mysticism, citing luminaries such as 'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani (one of the prominent commentators on Ibn 'Arabi), Corbin asserts that *Wilayah* (guardianship/spiritual authority) is the interior dimension of *Nubuwwah* (prophethood), and that attaining prophetic law requires attaining the station of *Wilayah*—a realization achieved through knowing and spiritually connecting with the Lord of the Age (*Wali al-'Asr*). In his work on the chivalric tradition (*Futuwwah / A'in-e Javanmardi*), he articulates Kashani's perspective on *Wilayah*—which forms the core of the doctrine of Mahdavidism—as follows:

“According to 'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani, *Wilayah* is an intrinsic dimension of prophethood. In his view, reaching the station of prophethood necessitates first attaining the station of *Wilayah*, because every prophet was a *Wali* (saint/guardian) prior to becoming a prophet. Thus, it is evident that *Nubuwwah* is superadded to *Wilayah*; that is, *Wilayah* is permanent and enduring, whereas institutional prophethood is temporal and historical—an insight we deduce directly from Shi'i prophetology.”

