

The Political Dimension of Religion in Shiism

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Preface

"According to Islam, from the very beginning, State and Government are assumed to take as basic principles the religious thinking and ideas. In accordance with the definition given by the Iranian theologues:

"Religion is equivalent to a complex of rules, which together with the essence and the moral substance, essays to correlate the acts of government with ideas of divine inspiration, to answer all needs in the political and the development of social life sphere."

According to Muslim religion, the religious rule stands for the vital duty to aspire to Good and to avoid Evil, aspect which involves the social organization and the cooperation between people in order to accomplish its future tasks.

Unlike in Occidental society where Pragmatism and Rationalism prevail, in Islamic society, religion and Politics are interdependent and they cannot exist without each other.

In the process of studying and defining religion towards social action, the founder's role takes an important aspect: "Religion is an ordinary symbolic binding, which through belief and religious ceremonies received from the creator; it can secure connection and permanence at the same time".

E.DURKHEIM offers a first sociological definition of religion: "A religion is a solidary system of beliefs and relative practices of sacred acts, namely, acts separated from the forbidden ones (beliefs, practices) which unify all believers in the same spiritual community, which is called church."

According to Islam, religion consists of "the totality of fundamental beliefs which refer to human nature and universe and apply to human life."

Etymologically speaking, the word Islam means "obedience" and "obedience" signifies submitting God's commands. Submitting means applying God's orders. The basic principles of Islamic belief are God, angels (mala'ikah), books (kutubullah), messengers (rusulullah), Day of Judgement (yawmuddin), predestination (al-qadr), and life after death (akhirah).

The holy book of Islam is the Quran, which represents the main source of religious thinking in Islam and the traditional source as well of which formal and external aspects of religion derive. The seven principles are classified in three basic elements:

Tawhid (God's oneness) is the most important part of iman (belief). According to this element: "God is omniscient and almighty. He is kind and merciful; he is present anytime anywhere, he is the First and the Last.

Risalah is the means of communication between God and humanity. This element is the one designating God's "chosen" on earth, embodied by the Prophet (Mohamed) and the imams following him.

Akhirah represents life after death. On preparing for the Doomsday; man is obliged to do what God asks him to through the "voice" of the Prophet (Mohamed) and of the imams following him.

On Imam Ali's view, religion can be defined as it follows: "The basis of religion is God and the improvement of knowledge to confirm his existence. This veneration must be done without any doubt or hesitation, man being fully aware of God's merit, whom he has to follow. That is why God has

chosen prophets among Adam's sons, who through revelation, allowed them to bestow the content of religion by forbidding polytheism and by asking to move away from idols."

In the VII-th century, MOHAMED, an Arab from a Bedouin tribe, preached a new religion which "confused" the world. This religion arose in the territories of present Saudi Arabia, in a perimeter dominated by the practice of religious concepts of "magi".

The new religion has ordered the worshipping of only one God and the destruction of idols. "Mohamed, aged 40, has begun his mission being supported by his wife, relatives and some friends and later by poor people, handicraftsmen, free people and slaves, like Bilal, the negro slave."

In 612, the prophet, as a result of a vision commanding him to make public his mission, started his apostolate by laying stress on "God's might and glory".

Mircea Eliade considered that: "Mohamed didn't intend to create a new religion. He just wanted to awake his fellow citizens and convince them they must worship God only, as he is the creator of Sky and Earth and the only guarantor of fertility."

In 622, Mohamed and his disciples left Mecca to Medina and there came to an agreement with other Arab groups, this moment being marked as the period of Arab expansion. In 624, Mohamed defeated the Meccans and for the first time the Prophet spoke to his followers about the holy war (JIHAD) against God's opponents.

In accordance with the quranic verses, Islam is the religion of peace and forgiveness, this representing the starting point in the Prophets' mission.

The quran imposes each follower to defend religion as duty and natural right: light in Islam is allowed and legal only when it is framed in a holy war. It pursues praising God's words and the revival of Islamic values, any other form of aggression not being permitted."

The first fundamental principle of Islam is the Monotheism, which is the belief in the unique God called Allah. The second principle is being represented by the establishment of a social equity on the basis of the quranic verses, the Holy Book being assimilated with law.

The third principle is represented by the Prophets' role in social life. For individuals, the Prophecy consists in the sharing of Divine Law which was revealed by God to the Prophets in order to lead the world to perfection.

In Islam, it is said that: "priesthood (the imamate) represents the promotion and the establishment of divine law in society." Imam's duties are the following:

The Imam has to be a model which people have to follow in every day life; he is the secular reflection of quranic virtues.

He has to establish the order of the society and divide the responsibilities.

The imam is supposed to change the divisions between Muslims into one unity as God sent prophets to guide people to unity, solidarity and moving away the differences between them.

He has to promote virtues and forbid evil.

He has to set equity and social right, to prevent aggression and discourage social deviation and corruption.

The Imam is the one leading the war against enemies and divides properties and income.

He has to organize the pray ritual.

2. Shiism, the historical moment of division

The term Shiism has appeared making reference to Imam Ali's followers, the first ruler of Prophet's house and the one who first embraced the Islamic religion. He was assured after Mohamed's death he would be called his successor and heir. The supreme proof for the shiits that Ali was the legitimate successor of the Prophet was the Ghadir Kuhumn event, when Mohamed assigned Ali as the major protector (walayat-immah).

After the Prophet's death, Ali's partisans believed the caliphate and the religious authority (marjaya-ilmi) belonged to him. Instead, the Prophet's close friends didn't appoint Imam Ali their caliph, situation which led to division and the forming inside Islam of the "Ali's partisans - the shiah" minority. This minority was first condemned due to the political circumstances of the moment.

The first appointed Caliph, Abu Bakr, also called "the imam of God" (khalifat al-rasul), has designated Omar as his successor in 634, to whose succession followed Othman who was killed in 644.

The new caliph of Medina was appointed Imam Ali, circumstance which marked the short ascension of the shiits. Due to the divergences with Muavie, the governor of Syria, there took place many military confronts which finally determined some of Ali's adepts to leave him (the kharigits). In 661, at Kuffa, one kharigit assassinated Ali, moment which coincided with Muavie's appointment as the new caliph of Medina and which marked the beginning of the dark period of Shiism.

The differences between Shiits and Sunnis don't lie in principles but in spirit "Shiism has doubts in accepting the idea of majority and pursues the ethic superiority of an active minority or the rational defense of oppressors". This idea was expressed, in 683, in the fundament of revolt of Imam Hossein and the other 72 allies of his, revolt which ended with his martyrdom at Kerballah.

The doctrinaire essence of Shiism could be summarized in the expression "Great Hope", which consists in the final victory over oppression and oppressors, through the appearance of the divinized Imam, (mahdaviat).

"Over the history, the appearance of the savior Imam prepared the collective conscience in order to face Mahdy's revolution and the world-wide reform."

The Mahdaviate followed up the religious rebirth by respecting Prophets' experiences and considered the incomplete temporary rebirths as dangerous, being known they couldn't determine people adhere to religion unless a sacred personality pertaining to the Prophets' category was present among them.

The Iranian philosopher, Dr. A. Souroush stated that: "The Mahdaviate is accepted in our religious society. It is part of the religious life of our nation both before the Islamic Revolution and moreover, in present, when Islamic government is developing. Mahdy's epiphany will usher in for the Islamic world a new era of justice and wealth."

3. Philosophy- Politics and the great thinkers of Islam

One of the greatest philosophers of Islam, FARABI (257-338 according to selenary calendar), brought a major contribution to the political philosophy of Islam. He was the one who debated upon the bases of political judgment and social ideas with regard to town in the Islamic world. According to FARABI's conception, Politics is part of Philosophy or of a well organized system, presented by philosophers like a rational structured organism.

The tradition FARABI followed in elaborating the political thought was taken over from the great philosophers of ancient Greece, Platon and Aristotle. Two of his most important philosophical works are The Civil Politics and Judgments of the inhabitants of the city of Utopia (Judgments of Utopia's inhabitants).

"The Civil Politics" presented a hierarchy of existence:

1. origin in primary condition;
2. origin in secondary condition;
3. active reason in third condition;
4. instinct in fourth condition;
5. form in fifth condition;
6. substance in sixth condition;

Further on, the author defined and explained each condition reaching "the tenth reason", also called "active reason", which, in his opinion, would be responsible for the way the spiritual and material existence of human being are organized. His conclusion is that perfection can be reached provided that people get rid of their savage instincts and leave aside the material world.

In Judgments of Utopia's inhabitants, reasoning followed the same direction except for it was much more detailed.

The first chapter, Introduction to the primary essence, described man as having no defects and acquiring eternal existence and absolute perfection. In the next chapters, the author spoke about God's oneness and his qualities.

The philosopher described the way existent things take shape and depicted the hierarchy of existence in the chapter Introduction to the world's appearance from primary cause. In depicting the world, FARABI inspired himself from the tradition of Greek philosophy, familiar to him from the Neo-Platonists' work.

In the fifth chapter, FARABI, mentioned that man's way to virtue depends on the urban community which can stimulate dignified good acts of the urban inhabitants and of peoples in general, making possible the aspiration for the accomplishment of this ideal. All this social structure is possible only in the presence of a leader who encourages good manners in his town and helps people understand and respect laws.

This system called monarchy or ruling is elected by people. Therefore, through Politics it is understood the definite expression of people. FARABI considered that man's perfection arises from the collaboration of two spiritual forces, the theoretical reason which is gifted to understand the truth and the practical reason, which perceives beautiful perfect things, contributing to people's understanding of dignified true acts. In conclusion, man differs from animal by the uncommon strength of will, called choice.

Choice is a more profound and more rational conscience than meanings and imagination. Choice represents an aspiration to perfection and the procedure in order to reach it. According to FARABI, man is above all a social human being. Solitude impoverishes him and finally makes him lose humanity and qualities that represent the basic condition to reach happiness.

FARABI stated that society has two basic components:

The complete society (humanity (big), nations (medium), town (small), and confession).

The incomplete society (family, rural environment).

The philosopher appreciated that only in complete societies man can aspire to virtue and supreme perfection. He developed the concept of a worldwide community whose ruler must be the leader of the entire civilized world not only of a nation or of community.

Continuing FARABI's work, ABUL HASSAN AMERI considered that "man in his essence is a social being and only the keeping of good traditions (sunnat) might lead him to happiness. Tradition is an explanation given to reason and teaches man how to avoid and distinguish between meanness. Politics is a proper transposition of customs by politician in city's social life. The politician is indebted to rule people firmly to the goal dictated by tradition. His goal consists in accomplishing every person's welfare in accordance with his needs."

In AMERI's view, wisdom, honor, courage and sense of justice embodied the same meanings and features like in Platon and Aristotle's. AMERI divided cities in good ones (Utopian) and bad ones (anti-Utopian). Speaking of equity and inequity, he suggested the tyrant to respect tradition accrediting the idea that respecting law is compulsory for everyone, even for prophets like MOHAMED and Imam AL AMERI specified that proper Politics is

determined by two elements:

Tradition and proper appliance of laws;

Politician's dignity and wisdom;

When these factors strengthen, society will be able to reach happiness. The stability of a society is assured if good traditions are respected and the politician is dignified. Bad customs always lead to the weakening of the society and unworthy politicians determine disagreements between people and even worse they cause the destruction of the society.

In AMERI's opinion, the best tradition belongs to the Islamic religion, and in his vision, the Persian king embodies the best politician. In his paper, Alsaadatol Assad, AMERI considers that "God created kings to materialize his wishes and to protect slaves. This is why I say kings are God's followers on earth. God appointed them in their position and not people. God Almighty appointed him Monarch and not those who are being ruled and aspire to perfection.

AMERI mentioned three fundamental elements, which pave the Monarch the way to wisdom:

- Education, legislation and the system of moral standards.

- Ruling projects depending on demographic factors, the support for handicraftsmen.

- Election of high officials, ministers and counselors among submissive.

The monarch can reach perfection and integrity if he respects the right prophecy and the consolidation of the perfect kingdom. AMERI believed that Politics cannot reach the wisdom necessary to lead society to happiness, unless there is a connection between the Imam and the Monarch. This approach of Politics is called Imamate. Kingdom does not infringe The Imamate, the perfect kingdom is the Imamate, and politician is God's representative.

The worst kingdom is that of tyranny and its goal is to enslave people and impoverish the society.

AMERI appreciated that the Islamic prophet is a man embodying both Prophecy and Kingdom. The result of his actions conducts to the grandeur prosperity and nations' progress, driving the tyrants away from their throne.

The greatest merit of the Prophet was that he brought with him the good traditions, which are the basis of religious principles, traditions that he implemented in the social life of the strongest kingdoms, consolidating important dynasties. Thus, if Shariah relies on these factors, Prophet's followers, politicians and kings relying on tradition and Prophet's preaching become the Imams of their times.

Moreover, these people are perceived as sources of forgiveness and divine mercy for the whole world, attitude, which should be followed by the entire humanity.

ABUZEID ABDULRAHMAN IBN KHALDUN, considered "the sociologist of tyranny", was one of the most important philosophers of the Islamic world. He witnessed two major historical events: the dissolution of the state of the Seljuciz Turks by the Othmans and the forming of the Mongolic state. IBN KHALDUN met TAMERLAIN six months before his death, during besiege of Damascus.

That period was one of transition, Europe passing from Middle to Modern Ages. IBN KHALDUN was born 11 years after Dante's death being contemporary with Boccaccio and Petrarca. It has to be mentioned that soon after the Muslim philosopher's death, printing press was invented. All his work and especially Muqaddama were spread by the Othman kings.

Multilateral research of Politics during early Islam didn't find place in the ideological circles of Islam resuming itself to quotations and legends chosen according to the moment. In IBN KHALDUN's view: "The more crisis and struggle for power were increasing; emotional confrontation was amplifying, situation which drew the attention upon certain sects and confessions and less upon tyranny.

Therefore, the tyrant, member of a sect, was being adulated by his adepts who believed by the force he was empowered with he could eliminate the enemies existent in social life." IBN KHALDUN exposed the idea that: "Tyranny is an inevitable natural form of Politics in all human communities, and it can be compared with the stars' move, plants' growing and with maternal love, elements which lie at the basis of humanity's perpetuation.

The philosopher considered the Utopian town as fantastic but unreal. This statement bases on the idea that: "Humanity needs society being obliged to have a leader. The ruler's acts must rely on Shariat, all members

of the community being obliged to respect the laws which were sent to them by Divinity."

For Muslim kings, Politics must be done in compliance with Shariat, and the promulgated laws must be of divine inspiration consenting the aspirations to enrichment and the fanatical manifestations of the king.

IBN KHALDUN defined human society as: "the mutual coexistence of people in a specific city, or in one of its arias, based on the relations of ethnical kinship and aiming at satisfying personal necessities, as cooperation in the name of existence is determined by human being's nature."

In this sense, IBN KHALDUN considered that the most obvious example would be TAHER IBN HOSSEIN's letter to his son ABDULLAH IBN TAHER, which was a collection of religious, ethical and political rules conceived in order to rule the kingdom: "King is one of the members of society, situated on its highest rank, and rules people so that nobody can hurt community. Therefore, the sense of the existence of monarchy consists in this."

IBN KHALDUN appreciated that the followers of the Holy Book (the Quran) and of the Prophet are in minority compared to the followers of Other Books (the Bible, the Tore), whom he called pagans. He considered them numerically superior, situation which would facilitate the building of cities and states.

Thus, the philosopher stated that: "there's no need to bring any other arguments which to prove the necessity of prophecy except for the belief in the existence of prophecy and the maintaining of order through Shariat. Monarchy known during the entire history of humanity is the supreme power held by a member of society in order to maintain order."

The book "Introduction" is divided in six parts, each of it approaching human society with the mention that the third part explicitly treats the notions of city, state, caliphate, monarchy and hierarchy of government.

The city is governed by a wise ruler who in IBN KHALDUN's vision is vested with power so that he wouldn't let anyone hurt the citizens. In defending the city from the attacks of the enemies he uses the force of guns. "In Bedouin society, appreciated and respected old men assume their authority, stopping the members of the tribe acting violent one each other. In case of an outer aggression courageous young soldiers assume their role as protectors, therefore the duty of defending the country can be accomplished provided that the defenders should be fanatics."

IBN KHALDUN added: "In case of danger, such a fanatic attitude, to which task is protecting people, residences and lands, is necessary. Prophecy and the forming of State cannot be accomplished without fight being known disobedience is a characteristic of human nature. Man cannot be asked to do a thing or other without being convinced or obliged by means of war.

The philosopher was convinced that the best example of tight ethnical relations can be noticed in "the environment of those leading a similar way of life to that of Arab Bedouins, the existent social order impeding the relations between different tribes (Marriages to people from different

ethnics)", IBN KHALDUN referred to the existence of a basic factor in society and Politics which he called "priority force".

Therefore: "the central power can appear only in one clan but not in all. As this cannot be instituted except with the victory upon the others, it is necessary that the thirst for power of the clan's members to be stronger than the other forms of fanaticism. When defeating all, they'll be empowered to rule forever. Hence, power is always maintained by a specific fanaticism of a certain clan."

Analyzing the bases of social life, the author drew the conclusion that fanaticism led to the foundation of monarchy which represents the final form of expressing fanaticism. In KHALDUN's view, not any ruler can be called shah, and not any public order can be a monarchy.

In conclusion: "King (shah) and monarchy represent the highest stages of progress which human society can reach. In other words, although tyranny is a cause of the forming and consolidation of power, obedience towards ruler isn't bound to violence but to his natural superiority and authority, universal fanaticism being a guarantee of the efficiency and authority. Still, these conditions aren't always and forever enough to rule.

Monarchy is tyranny and it is superior to ruling because ruling means control and the one who detains the power even if he is a ruler he doesn't use violence in the relations with his obedient, while monarchy means control and rule based on violence.

Monarchy initially developed into tribes with various infrastructure and different dispositions. Kingdom, consisting in all people embracing fanatical principles, appeared there where fanaticism was stronger. Hence, it can be stated that tyranny is the last stage of fanaticism. IBN KHALDUN appreciated that: "In Politics, monarchy promotes the Good and the Dignity.

The monarch is respectable to be God's deputy on earth. He is an intermediary between divinity and state and has the duty to rule the latter. He is highly regarded for his status to which origin stays in fanaticism. Monarchy is a necessity of collective life and requires legislation and order. If laws are elaborated by wise officials, the prevailing Politics of the State is wise and if laws are of divine provenience, Politics is religious". IBN KHALDUN divided political rule of society in three categories:

1. natural monarchy (people's life develops according to necessities and its innate feelings);
2. political monarchy (based on the rational rule of society in the name of utility and of getting rid of the sins committed in laic life);
3. the caliphate (social rule according to Shariat with the purpose of satisfying the laic interests and those related to the belief in life after death, in this case Politics being ruled by God's deputy on earth on behalf of protecting religion and human society.)

Several harmful aspects and phenomena can characterize monarchy but overall it does not contain a negative prevalent role. Religion does not utter monarchy must be given up but only judges its passions and violence: the purpose of religious precepts does not mean giving up reason but its use in an adequate way. When monarchy brings violence and cruelty with it, Shariat forbids it considering it prejudicial to the society."

IBN KHALDUN considered that: "old people's assembly must appoint the Imam and nation must obey this appointment because God said: Obey God, the Prophet and your rulers. In order for the Imam to be elected he must be endowed with four qualities: knowledge, thirst for justice, competence, and mental and physical health."

As for the confrontation between Imam Ali and Muavie, it represented the anxieties during the period of transition and the war against fanaticism, which appeared after a period of religious domination. Even if he appreciated that, in this war, justice belonged to Imam Ali, he did not blame Muavie, as he considered the latter was not bad intentioned either: "when monarchy imposed an absolutist-monopolizing ruling, MUAVIE embraced fanaticism."

On brief, IBN KHALDUN concluded that: 'fanaticism is a phenomenon gradually developing which will not disappear but which can considerably change under the influence of religion. The hereditary election of the follower would not be specific to the religious precepts as ruling is a condition given by God to the Imam whom he chose to rule.'

4. The relation between religion and power

Asabady, born in Iraq, played an important role among the contemporary thinkers of Islam. He considered "internal dictatorship and colonialism as the great enemies of the Islamic societies".

During his journeys to Asia, he advised Muslims to assimilate occidental science but still to keep some reserves towards it. He supported stoutly: "interdependence between Politics and religion and each Muslim's necessity to involve in the Politics of the country". Asabady stressed the idea of Islamic unity, which he considered more than necessary, because it reduces the external danger and strengthens the collective conscience.

He was one of the thinkers who had a major role in Islamic acknowledgment of the notion of Jihad (holy fight). Asabady's ideas inspired the ayatollah Khomeini the ruler of the Islamic revolution and the founder of the first Islamic Republic: "Asadabady tried to prove that Islam represents the foundation of an ideology guiding to prosperity and moral success of people and tried to make clear social philosophy and Islamic laws by defining the secondary elements of religion.

From his Islamic position he opposed Occidental culture and way of thinking announcing the national revolution against English, in Iraq, in 1920."

The same conceptual approach was used in 1963 by the Imam Khomeini who opposed the Shah's reforms and started "the White Revolution" by denouncing the connections established by the Shah with the United States and Israel. The word "politics" used in Persian is of Arab origin and derives from "sas" and "iasus". It has more significance, the most important one being "absolute ruling".

A basic principle of Iranian Politics is found in Imam Hossein's testament: "I do not selfishly oppose against corruption and oppression. My goal is guiding Muslims according to Islamic precepts. I consider that one who does not obey the Holy Book and does not act for justice and respect for the true way cannot be called Imam or ruler. In Islam, right to legislation and appliance of laws belongs to prophets." The Islamic government's goals are:

- Use of wealth and budget in the interest of the Islamic nation.
- Defense of Islam and nation.
- Providing security and humans' peaceful life.
- Protection of weak people.

When Islamic Revolution burst, the Imam Khomeini expressed his intention to fight against tyranny (the shah's), dependence on foreign powers, and corruption and to institute a society based on Islamic principles: "the idea that religion must break up with Politics and Muslim scientists should not get involved in political and social affairs is a strategy launched by colonialists. Not only that Islam isn't separated from Politics but even it is the religion of Politics, prayers having political substance."

Dr. Abolhamid from the University of Teheran appreciated that: "Islamic revolution corresponds to a fundamental change both in social, moral, economic, juridical sphere and moreover in the political one. Violence is

often used in removing a political regime, situation which causes human victims.

In Khomeini's opinion, the origin of Islamic Revolution should be regarded from Iranian and Lebanese Shifts' point of view that supported the Islamic renaissance. Three fundamental principles lie at the basis of this concept and they are:

1. the Islamic constitutional movement;
2. the spread of Islam;
3. martyrdom.

In Iran, the 1906 constitutional revolution was the symbol of the confrontation between Islamic culture and tradition and occidental values.

Due to the misunderstandings between modern fundamentalists and conservationists-traditionalists regarding to the establishment of the Islamic state, constitutional revolution was soon over, making way to anarchy. In these circumstances, in 1911, Russia supported the institution of a dictatorship regime.

After the assassination of two representatives of the Iranian Clerics, in 1961 and 1962, Imam Khomeini became marji al-taghid, the supreme juridical and religious authority. In 1963, he made reference to the Islamic revolution and asked people to adhere to his ideas.

In 1979, Imam Khomeini proclaimed the Islamic republic in Iran and Islam became state religion, the Islamic state being ruled by an Imam who would impose, by governing, the basic principles of Islam.

According to the great ayatollah Mohamed Bakr Al-Sadr, the Islamic governing shouldn't rely on Individualism and the uninvolvement of the individual in the society or on the imperialists or social values. The Islamic state is similar to God's state, it is neither absolutist or tyrannical to respect the rules mentioned in the Coran being a must for the governors.

The Islamic state has two spheres:

1. Internal, which bases on the applying of the Islamic rules and on the creation and education of the Islamic identities.
2. External, the promotion of Islam across the world, the support for poor Muslims in their fight against Imperialism and Communism, the assurance of material-spiritual security of the Islamic nation.

5. Islam and Terrorism

After the burst of the Middle East crisis, in great part, caused by Israel's creation in 1948, the imminence of a conflict between Occidental civilization assimilated to Christianity and the oriental one dominated by the Islamic values has become obvious. The dispute between Jewish and Muslims for the Holy City reached its peak during crusades, this confrontation between the Occident and the Islamic world taking one of the most violent facets -the terrorism.

The Afghan mujahediins, disposing of American technology and funds generously offered by Saudi Arabia, have obtained a historical victory over the orthodox Russians. For Islam, this victory may be considered as important as Jerusalem's freeing by the caliph Sallahudin. This moment represented a turning point for Islam and gave hopes to the millions of Muslims to continue Jihad till the final victory over the Infidels.

Another reference point on the international terrorism spiral constituted 2001, September 11-th event, when the most representative symbols of American civilization embodied by The Twin Towers (bourse- finance) and The Pentagon (military force) were stricken.

It was obvious for everyone that Samuel Hungtington's prophecies were justifying the collision between civilizations which had reached its critical point.

The entire Islamic world was to suffer due to the anti-Islamic campaign, terms like Islamic terrorist and Muslim fundamentalist being associated to it.

In the Quran, the word "jihad" means "the supreme effort in order to accomplish a goal" and it also can be interpreted as "a means of sacrifice for God's cause in order to eliminate dishonest people and to re-establish a correct new system." The Jihad's goals are presented in the Coran as it follows:

To broaden belief in God and to accept unconditionally his commands (Fight against your enemies in the way God asked you to.)

To help weak and oppressed people (What indeed stops you to fight for God's cause and for vulnerable defenseless people?)

To cease persecution (Fight against your enemies by believing in God and do not commit aggressions. Muslims are not allowed to use any weapons and burning people alive or committing acts of cruelty a^e forbidden by God when waging Jihad.) The notion of Islamism particularly used after 1980 by the ultra-nationalist Arab organization "Muslim Brothers" to which adept it was, should be very well understood. This term represents "the political measures resulting from Islam which pursues to use religion in freedom and fight's ideology".

Hence, the supreme expression of Islamism is fundamentalism, which is an infrastructure, common to radical movements, and able to generate resistance to the secularization and inequity process by the constant use of religious conditions." Moreover, Hassan Al-Banna, founder of "Muslim Brothers" organization released the doctrine: "neither west nor east, but Islamic republic".

Presently, the Islamic world is looking for a means of communication with the Occident and the Christian Values. Tradition and new philosophical Iranian thinking consider the dialogue is necessary because world relies on individual's liberty and independent will.

The fact that there is an Iranian concept "THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN CIVILIZATIONS", Teheran makes great efforts to calm the regional situation and to normalize Iran's relations with the International Community, represents a first step made by Islam for the inter-confessional reconciliation.

It is important to mention that International Community shows an increased interest in Iranian's thesis, this representing one of the viable constructive solutions for Middle East crisis.

The fact that European sociologists among whom we find follow with great interest the present operative situation from Iraq and Autonomic Palestinian Territories is the natural result of Romania's involvement in the peaceful settlement of the conflicts which afflict the Islamic World.

The Publishing of some valuable papers, which I consulted as bibliographical source, made possible the elaboration of the present dissertation with regard to a new increased interest theme approached during the course.

It is not settled yet whether Pentagon's plans to destroy "The Axis of Evil" would continue in the future with an invasion in Iraq, plan stated also by the American president G.W. BUSH on his re-investiture at White House. It looks like the project is temporarily postponed from both circumstantial purposes (Iraqian crisis and the respect of the traveling warrant for the Palestinian problem) and diplomatic purposes.

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The Holders of Authority and Legitimacy in Mahdism Doctrine

In the lights of Mahdism teachings Shia' Muslims have to fight to the improvement of the world, to bring it closer to that model of perfect society that should bring peace to the world, to prepare the world for the coming of the Mahdi.

The awaiting of the Mahdi's return is an inspiration to the Shia and concretizes as a doctrine of hope making policy more optimistic, determining the Shia to believe in a better future of humanity, as well as motivating them to help to its construction. The awaited victory of right, virtue, peace, justice, freedom and truth over forces of evil in all its forms, motivates continuously Shia society and will help to its every day improvement.

However, what until the time of reappearance, what should Shia society do, until the time of reappearance? Who should govern the Shia society and through what means of government? Is Wilayat-e-faqih a copy of Mahdism or should the system improve in itself?

Mahdism argues about just government with equal distribution of wealth and property among men, eradication of vices, war and restoration of peace, good governance, friendship cooperation and benevolence.

With Mahdism as the central axis of the Shia theology, covering the most important doctrines of Islam, Shia Doctrine assumes a future-oriented history. Shia Doctrine because of Mahdism founds itself in a perpetual state of progressiveness, giving it a built-in mechanism of self-improvement.

A Divine Chain of Leadership

Since the beginning of creation, man becomes a ruler (Khalifa) of God over its creation and throughout its representatives, God rules over whole of its creation. Since the beginning, there was always a mediator between God and its creation. Mediators acted as proofs of God onto the earth as transmitters of divine emanation. They were perfect and infallible men. Through them man was instructed to follow the path of divine realization and the knowledge of God in order to gain deliverance and salvation.

God delivered his message and law through which believers could worship him. He appointed chosen men to guide the human community throughout its existence. They are the vice-regents of God and leaders of the human community. All Abrahamic religions believe in a chain through which God will is revealed and known to humans, through which God guided them towards salvation.

The Shia doctrine, by Mahdism Doctrine is though the only religion that kept such a relationship alive. It looks like a chain of representatives of God links the human community from its beginning until the end of time to God and His will.

This holy chain is portraying and guiding men towards worship. Shia Doctrine can be seen in this aspect as a progressive creed, indulged in the belief of continue divine leadership. According to Shia Doctrine, God created man for a noble purpose, which is to worship Him and lead a virtuous life based on His teachings and guidance.

How would man know his role and purpose of his existence unless he received clear and practical instructions of what God wants him to do? Here comes the need of this divine chain. As what else would be the purpose of creation if not worshiping the Creator, knowing the creator and obeying Him? Moreover, how else can this relation been kept alive if not by delivering continuous divine representation? How else can believers obey if not sensing God's greatness and leadership?

Only by understanding such a continuous relation will we be able to understand the Shia believes, to recognize its progress throughout history and to see its present as a stage in its development. Nevertheless, let us have a historical perspective on this divine chain linking humanity to the Divine, to be able to understand the Shia and Mahdism Doctrine as well as the Iranian Islamism.

1. The Prophets of God- Guidance and Leadership for Humanity

At first, there were the prophets of God. Prophethood is a common belief to heavenly revealed religions, having a special status and significance. Prophethood is God blessing and favor that He may bestow on whom He wills.

Every prophet stated clearly throughout history that what he receives is not of his own, but from God for the well-being of humanity. Prophets confirmed what was revealed before him and what may be revealed after him.

A prophet does this to show that he is simply conveying the message that was entrusted to him by the One True God of all people in all ages. Therefore, the message is one in essence and for the same purpose; it should not deviate from what was revealed before him or what might come after him.

Prophets are necessary for conveying God's instructions and guidance to humankind. We have no way of knowing the reason we were created. What will happen to us after death? Is there any life after death? Are we accountable for our actions? In other words, is there any reward or punishment for our deeds in this life?

These and so many other questions about God cannot be answered without revelation from the Creator and Knower of the unseen and does it not knowing God, one of the fundamental duty of the believers? Those answers must be authentic and must be brought by individuals whom we trust and respect. That is the reason why messengers are the select of their societies in terms of moral conduct and intellectual ability.

Supported by God and instructed divinely prophets affirmed and delivered from the beginning of creation a continuous message. They presented clear concept of God, His attributes, His creation and the unseen. They delivered the reason of creation, rewards and punishments to humanity for obeying or disobeying God. However, most important for the purpose of my thesis, they showed humanity how to run their societies according to His testament.

That is, clear instructions and laws that, when applied correctly and honestly, will result in an ideal society.

The Quran mentions the names of 25 prophets and indicates that there have been others that are not mentioned to Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). These 25 include Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (PBUT), who are the greatest among God's messengers.

"Say (oh, Muslims) we believe in God and that which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael, and Isaac and Jacob, and their children, and that which Moses and Jesus received and that the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them and unto Him we have surrendered."

The last prophet in the chain of God was Muhammad (PBUH). He was born in Arabia in the sixth century C.E. He descends from the lineal chain of Abraham and his son Ishmael, being a member of Banu Hashim family, who were the holders of Mecca. People knew him as a man of excellent

character, cultured manners, and called him "the trustworthy", even before his delegation as a prophet.

His revelation by God, claims to be the book of guidance for the whole humanity for all times, and mentions Muhammad as the last Prophet of God- The seal of Prophets. Once he died, Prophethood ended but not the divine guidance and leadership of humanity that continued in the mind of the Shia.

2. Imamate

The Shia believes that humanity is in need of sustained spiritual guidance, provided by the Imam, who is the guardian and guide of all Muslims politically and spiritually. They hold that Muhammad explicitly designated his cousin and son-in-law Ali as his Khalifa (Successor). Thus, Shia believes Muhammad designated Ali and his direct descendants to serve as the Imams (wali-leaders) of the Muslim community.

This assertion implies that, while the cycle of Prophethood ended with Muhammad, the cycle of Imamate began with Ali and continues amongst his direct descendants. For Shia Muslims, an Imam is a leader (wali), whose guidance extends to spiritual and temporal matters. In other words, an Imam can sanction new laws because he has direct contact with God.

This direct contact makes an Imam infallible and invests in him the prerogative of interpreting the Quran, thereby gradually revealing its esoteric meaning. On the ground of Ghadir Khumm, Muhammad declared "To whomsoever I am Master, Ali is his Master" and following this principle is one of the fundamentals of Shia Doctrine, therefore, they believe that Ali ibn Abu Talib is the 1st Imam to teach the correct interpretation of Islam, the successor of Muhammad.

The Imam is the leader and example "from whose intellectual power and insight, those traveling toward God benefit, whose conduct and mode of life they imitate, and to whose commands they submit." In a very large and comprehensive sense, Imamate includes both intellectual authority and political leadership.

"After the death of the Prophet, the Imam was entrusted with the guardianship of his accomplishments and the continuation of his leadership, in order to teach men the truths of the Quran and religion and ordinances concerning society; in short, he was to guide them in all dimensions of their existence..." "The true and veritable Imam is that exalted person, who combines in himself intellectual authority and political leadership."

He is the one "who stands at the head of Islamic society, being enabled thereby both of convey to men the divine laws that exist in every sphere and to implement them; and who preserves the collective identity and the human dignity of the Muslims from decline and corruption."

The community saw itself well organized under the leadership of the Prophet (PBUH) and when he was gone, it was due for someone to replace him in the same position and authority. Imam Ali was the Imam from the day the Prophet Muhammad closed his eyes as he appointed him rightfully. He continues the divine light of guidance, regardless whether he became a Khalifa or not. The imam is the person who has comprehensive leadership in religious as well as worldly matters as the successor of the Prophet." The Imam was therefore the universal authority entrusted divinely on both of the mentioned aspects.

Based on the succession of the Prophet, Imamate does not only reflect the spiritual guidance and leadership, it includes the social and political leadership also. Imamate is a position that combines the spiritual and religious leadership as well as the socio-political and worldly leadership. For the Shia, Ali is the first imam as well as the first Khalifa of the Prophet.

Therefore, we cannot consider rationally that Ali is the first Imam but not the immediate successor of the Prophet. The difference between Shia and Sunnis is not about the spiritual leadership; it is on the socio-political leadership immediately after the death of the Holy Prophet.

God appointed Prophet Muhammad as to be the leader of the community, a community being religious, as well as social and political. It was a civil and a moral community that God entrusted to him, so he had a comprehensive authority and leadership. The appointment of a successor had to mean that Imams would benefit with the same authority and leadership.

Assuming that because imams did not historically exercise their political authority and leadership, they do not have this authority and leadership designated to them is a false supposition that cannot stand for itself. Not exercising one's role and function does not prove the non-existence of the authority as is obvious.

"The twelve Imams themselves, and above all, the present twelfth or hidden Imam, were held to be necessary to the constitution of the Universe and of true religion. The Imam is God's proof, he is the pillar of the Universe, the 'gate' through whom God is approached."

The Imams are considered to be the successors of the Prophet (PBUH) and therefore the right holders of his authority, not because they are from his family but because they possessed the qualities of being pious, obedient to Allah and because they embody characteristics that are pre-required for this level of religious-political leadership".

The Shia considers Imamate, like Prophethood, to be a fundamental belief, and obedience to the authority of their Imam, a religious obligation. Other than receiving divine revelation, which is specifically for the prophets, the Imams have all the qualities, duties and authority of the Prophet (PBUH); in consequence, they have the political and social as well as religious authority.

Political and religious guidance emanate from them and they are guardians over the believers, as God is the guardian of believers and as God delegated this guardianship to the Prophet, his authority is rooted in the mentioned Divine authority. As the authority of imams is rooted in the divine, why should not be the same applied to the deputies of Imam during the time of occultation?

Guardianship of the Prophet was originally established and legitimized by God's appointment. Following this interpretation, the followers of the imams provide a large number of traditions and historical evidence that confirm the delegation of the imams, by God, through the Prophet, as "guardians of the believers" (wali).

3. The holders of authority during the age of occultation of Imam Mahdi

After the death of Prophet Mohammad, Ali and his descendents exercised God vice regency on earth. This authority and governance in both religious and political matters was to remain theirs until the end of time. What can we say about authority and legitimacy in the time of occultation of the Mahdi, a time we are now experiencing according to Shia Doctrine?

We are currently living in the age of the Twelve Imam, the Mahdi. He is found in a state of occultation. Does it mean that being in this state of occultation he does not govern the Shia society? Occultation of the Imam is divided according to Shia in the minor and major occultation.

During the time of minor occultation, the Mahdi had appointed public deputies to guide the Shia in his absence. What does Shia Doctrine say about the Great Occultation? Has the deputation stop in the time the Shia community is currently experiencing?

According to Shia political doctrine, authority bestows upon a deputy by the infallible Imam and we can observe there is an important distinction between the specific designation of a deputy, and the 'general' designation of a number of deputies.

As while, there was an explicit nomination for each of the Imams to undertake leadership, and for the vice regency of the four deputies during the minor absence, the guardianship of the jurists during the greater absence is a 'general' designation. This means that no one is exclusively appointed as leader and deputy. Therefore, jurists who are just and qualified in Islamic jurisprudence have the right to exercise the Imam's authority as his deputies.

Regarding the leadership of the Islamic community during the period of greater occultation, the authority as well as leadership is entrusted to the just and capable scholar, who acts as a deputy to the absent Imam, through a system of vice regency. So the guardianship of a jurist is legitimized and his authority is related to the original and absolute authority of God.

In plus the jurist must be accepted by believers. As I mentioned above, a clear distinction should be drawn, however, between the authority of an imam and the guardianship of the scholars.

The Imams, whose authority is established upon their explicit designation by the Prophet, delegate and entrust a degree of their authority to those who possess specific qualities (such as justice and jurisprudence in the case of the scholar). Therefore, whereas the Imams were specifically appointed as guardians of legitimate authority, the jurists are not explicitly selected by name, but rather implicitly chosen as those who possess the correct qualities for leadership.

God has appointed prophets to run humanity in spiritual as well as in social and political matters. The last prophet appointed imams as legitimate holders of authority in religious as well as in political and social matters. Therefore, it is only logic to assume that in an era of occultation, the present Imam appointed his deputies to order in matters religious as well as political and social.

The doctrine of "guidance of the jurisprudent"(wilayat-e-faqih) forms the central axis of contemporary Shia political thought, advocating a

guardianship based political system, which relies upon a just and capable jurist to assume the leadership of the government in the absence of an infallible Imam.

Today, in a time of the Hidden Imam, the guidance of the jurisprudent is the authority designated to learned jurist so that they may direct and advise the Muslim community in the absence of an infallible Imam. This authority derives from the Imam; therefore, the believers have the religious duty to obey their commands as the only legitimate authority.

The concept of leadership encompasses many degrees of authority, summing up to the total scope of the scholar's vice regency in the absence of an infallible Imam.

Some erroneously assume that it is something new and in essence distinguishable from the traditional status of marjayat. This misunderstanding is caused by a lack of attention to the definitions of and the relationship between 'wilayat' and 'marjayat' and the distinction between 'fatwa' and 'hukm' (the commands of faqih as wali, leader).

This misunderstanding comes from the wrong conception that the role of a marja'a taqlid is solely a juridical authority to whom the Muslim community may refer to in the case of religious questions and commandments concerning the practical and personal side of Islam. However, this definition is not comprehensive as it concentrates itself exclusively on one of the legitimized functions of a jurist, while overlooking the others.

He is an expert in Islamic Law, a guide and proof of God's existence, a model to follow and a leader as the deputy of the imam. He is wali (leader) when he acts as a leader of someone and a marja'a taqlid when he is referred to in religious matters.

Wilayat al-faqih refers to the all-comprehensive authority of the jurist (faqih) in the absence of the twelfth Imam. "Wilayat al-faqih" may include functions like wilayat al-nizam (the authority to manage public order), wilayat al-qada (the authority to administer justice), wilayat al-siyasa (the authority to administer a government and hold political office and wilayat al-tasarruf (authority for the jurist to act in a way that he judges to be the best in the interest of the community).

A corollary to the wilayat al-faqih may include the duty to declare a jihad. It is to be noted that not all mujtahids accept the concept of the all-embracing and comprehensive view of wilayat al-faqih.

Marja al-taqlid refers to the role of a mujtahid who is competent to derive juridical rulings from the Quran and hadith literature and is able to arrive at solutions that are not explicitly stated in the sources, by having recourse to the principles as stated in usul al-fiqh. Such a mujtahid is qualified to issue juridical verdicts (or fatwa) and is a source of reference for followers, who pursue him by doing his taqlid (which literally means to imitate his acts).

Thus, it is possible for a person to be a marja al-taqlid without occupying the position of wilayat al-faqih. In addition, the other way around is also accepted, since in the Iranian constitution the leader is not obligatory a marja, and can be a simple mujtahid having leadership and managerial abilities.

Wilayat is a part of marjayat in the culture of the Shia

The great marjas not only guided people with respect to the divine Law, but they also led people in the particular problems of society, for example when judging between people in particular matters and domestic disputes.

The reason that the jurispudent is an authority in matters of the law is because of his specialization in jurisprudence and his power to derive the rules of God from their sources. The reason aside from the above-mentioned qualities, for a jurispudent to become a leader depends on his ability to manage society according to the principles and values of Islam.

It is because of this that it becomes possible for a person to be chosen as a leader due not so much to his aptitude in jurisprudence as much as to his better management skills. The separation of the offices of the marja and the leader becomes a reasonable, and in some instances, a necessary expedient. In principle, leadership is confined to a single person, whereas the marjayat is applicable to numerous individuals, just as does the possibility that the two offices to be combined in a single individual.

Since following the orders of the leader is obligatory upon all people, including other jurisprudents, and it is forbidden to disobey his orders, hence it is not possible for people to follow other than the leader in matters related to the social order and the running of society.

What was said above regarding the authority of the jurispudent was in reference to the individual order and to matters of a personal nature; it is in these matters that people can follow other than the leader.

When the jurispudent refers to the religious sources in order to obtain the general rule of God regarding a certain problem and uses the special techniques that exist for obtaining the rules of the Law, it is called giving an edict or "fatwa". When the leader pays attention to the general rules of God, the various systems in Islam, and the conditions of the time, and according to these delineates a person's or a specific group's responsibility with regards to a certain matter, this is called giving an order or a "hukm".

In doing this, he not only pays attention to the general rules of Islam and the lofty aspirations of the religion, but also to the specific conditions that exist in that time. The rules of God and the edicts of the jurispudent who has all the necessary qualifications are mandatory, just like the rulings of the leader, but with this difference that the jurisprudents rulings are mandatory to him and his followers only, while everyone must follow the orders of the leader.

According to the logic of the "leadership of the jurispudent" and its proofs, the jurispudent takes upon himself the management of society and in accordance with the values of Islam, he takes on the responsibility of leadership. Nevertheless, marjayat means simply to issue an edict and is a completely different matter.

The reason that the jurispudent is an authority in matters of the law is because of his specialization in jurisprudence and his power to derive the rules of God from their sources. On the other hand, the reason that a leader is what he is is because aside from the aforementioned qualities, he has the ability to manage society according to the principles and values of Islam.

It is because of this that it becomes possible for a person to be chosen as a leader due not so much to his aptitude in jurisprudence as much as to his better management skills. It is possible that there be numerous specialists in society. Moreover, this is something that is to be sought after, so that everyone can refer to them with ease and obtain their rulings.

A multiplicity of centers of decision-making would cause disturbance so, it is imperative for the Shia that the leader to be one. It is not however necessary that various jurisprudents issue one edict in order that society remains undisturbed. Leadership is confined to a single person, whereas the marjayat is applicable to numerous individuals.

That the office of Wali-e faqih and the Marja do not have to be one and the same according to the Iranian Islamic Republic, Constitution as I mentioned above. It could be or it could be not. It depends on the person who assumes that position. When it is one and the same, he should be considered a marja when issuing a fatwa and a wali when issuing orders in political as social matters.

Conclusions

The beginning of Islam is not separate from the beginning of the Shia as it started with the Prophet Muhammad (PUBH), and has been preserved in its original form by the succession of Imams.

Prophet Mohammad had the duty to propagate God's message, to teach the laws of religion and guidance, to judge between people and to lead and manage the society. These qualities and functions existed for the imams and exist for the jurists in the time of the occultation of the Last Imam. They too have three functions, to act as judges, to give edicts in law and to expound the general rules of the Divine law for the people and to lead.

A system of government by the jurist is therefore understandable for the Shia. Its legitimacy comes from God himself, throughout history. It is a chain through legitimacy transmits itself. Prophets, then imams, managed God's rule on earth at first and today, the jurist manages it. Jurists are divinely legitimated and are accepted by believers.

Understanding this governance of the jurist as well as the general guidance of a marja is of high importance in understanding the legitimacy of the jurist today when guiding the Shia Community.

This chain of guidance and legitimacy, as well as of authority is confined in the Mahdism Doctrine. Without the believe in the Mahdi's return at the end of time to establish equity and justice, without the believe that during his absence the believer must await positively, by acting rightfully and establishing a close to perfection society, the chain would have been cut dramatically.

While studying in one of the numerous seminaries in Qom, I had the opportunity to ask a great scholar about Mahdism and the guidance of the jurist. His answer...though simple and concise was that Wilayat-e-faqih is an exact replica of Mahdism.

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Stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims in the Western Mass Media: An Obstacle to the Movement of al-Imam al-Mahdi that Must be Confronted

Stereotyping of the "other" is still alive and well in America. The portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in both movies as well as the news is highly influenced by pro-Israeli interests. The portrayal is meant to shock at times and other times to subtly manipulate the masses into supporting Israeli and American policy and taking a stand against its opponents.

The bias has been seen many times in American coverage of the Middle East but was clearly seen in the Israeli-Hizbullah Conflict during the summer of 2006. Muslims globally have an uphill battle in promoting the movement of al-Imam al-Mahdi because of the mainstream western media's biases. A discourse analysis of two Detroit newspapers shows how this is the case.

Arabs and Muslims as the "Other"

The portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in the popular press is highly inflammatory and stereotypical. It is highly contemporary in that it is driven by current political situations. At the same time, such stereotyping is based on old archetypes created in the past to demonize. To understand what is happening and how it is will be an obstacle to Imam al-Mahdi's movement, it is beneficial to begin with a review of Jack G. Shaheen's book, *Reel Bad Arabs*.

Shaheen's book is a review of racist images of Arabs in the media collected over a span of 20 years. An encyclopedic attempt, the book covers more than 900 movies, most of which depict Arabs and Muslims as inhuman. By the end of the book, one can clearly see that Arabs and Muslims are the last ethnic groups who are still negatively portrayed by Hollywood without consequences. The Arabs are almost always part of five different plot schemes:

villains, sheikhs, maidens, Egyptians, and Palestinians. Shaheen ranks the movies in several appendices including a "best" and "worst" list.

"Other" groups have long been caricatured by Hollywood. These groups include African-Americans, Jews, Latinos and East-Asians. Generally they were depicted devoid of individual character and even when the subject of the movie was shown as an individual it was almost always within the context of a stereotype. Shaheen points out that much has happened in the last century-women's suffrage, the civil rights' movement, the collapse of the U.S.S.R, numerous wars-to change how minorities are represented, Arabs are still portrayed in much the same stereotypical way that they have been in the past.

While the stereotypes against other groups are today widely rejected in the media, Arabs are still fair game. Shaheen notes:

Pause and visualize the reel Arab. What do you see? Black beard, head dress, dark sunglasses. In the background-a limousine, harem maidens, oil wells, camels. Or perhaps he is brandishing an automatic weapon, crazy hate in his eyes and Allah on his lips. Can you see him?

As was the case with other ethnic groups in the past, Arabs are often depicted as oversexed and desiring pure, beautiful, white women. If Arab or Muslim women are portrayed, they are almost always either sexually inviting or faceless. In the case that they are sexually inviting, their seduction is almost always rejected by the "pure" white men as being below their dignity. Arabs are also depicted as being hook-nosed and devious. In many ways these caricatures mirror past western stereotyping of the Jews: thick lips, crooked nose, scruffy beard, angry faces, different dress.

The Arab is made to look ugly and thus evil. Even Arabs who may seem peaceful on the surface should be suspected of being violent. Shaheen notes that the same imagery which was used by Nazi propagandists to dehumanize the Jews is used today by Hollywood to dehumanize Arabs.

Shaheen notes that Islam is also an unfair target for Hollywood. Although most Arabs are Muslims, most Muslims are not Arabs, a fact that Hollywood seems to ignore. Throughout *Reel Bad Arabs*, "Arab" and "Muslim" are shown as being interchangeable.

Because mentioning every single review is not possible for this short paper, this reviewer is looking at examples of four different Arab/Muslim archetypes: villains, sheikhs, maidens, and Palestinians. All the examples mentioned below are taken from the "worst" film list-it's striking that many of the films to be mentioned in this paper were shot in Israel and even use Israeli actors to portray Arabs and Muslims.

This is surely no accident; such a portrayal is a part of winning hearts and minds to support the Israeli cause. Pro-Israelis achieve a number of objectives through negative portrayals of Arabs. Through repeatedly viewing images of Arabs and Muslims as angry, over-sexed, lazy, incoherent and strange, audiences come to give essential meaning to concepts which should only be viewed as incidental.

In this way, a concerted effort is being made to shape the subconscious image that the Western world has of the Muslim world, especially vis-à-vis the Palestinian question. By promoting the image of Arabs as incapable of peace, the pro-Israeli lobby is constructing a rationale for not bringing Arabs and Muslims to the same table as the Israelis.

Shaheen also points out that many of the most virulent images of Arabs as militant have come about after the creation of Israel. That Hollywood's movies are spread around the world and gross millions every week enforces these stereotypes not only on a national level but on an international one.

Shaheen doesn't say in *Reel Bad Arabs* that Arabs should never be portrayed as "bad guys" or that there are no movies which portray Arabs positively. The author makes it clear in introducing his book that Arabs can be bad guys like individuals from any other ethnic group.

Furthermore, he compiles a list of movies in which Arabs are portrayed sensitively. However, Shaheen makes it clear that Arabs are too often exclusively portrayed as evil, backwards, sexual, and incompetent. It is seemingly acceptable for Arabs and Muslims to be painted with a stereotypical broad brush. One may refer to Shaheen's book for hundreds of examples.

Toleration of Stereotyping Breeds Discrimination

The consequences of stereotyping minorities are manifold. In the case of Arabs and Muslims, the problems are compounded because approaches to the groups in the international arena can be seriously flawed,

as mentioned earlier in the case of Iraq. Widespread informal racism-racism which is not institutionalized-helps shape attitudes that can support legalized discrimination. Examples of attitudes like this abound in American history. The city of Detroit is a great example of how prejudicial attitudes can result in institutionalized discrimination, discrimination that contributes to more prejudice with potentially long lasting effects.

In the past, Metro-Detroit residential areas were ranked on a scale of green (good) to red (bad). Areas that had African Americans living in them were automatically given a red ranking. The reasoning was that if African-Americans moved into white neighborhoods, they would be sure to bring in crime, driving down property values and increasing taxes on residents in the area.

The fact was that for African-Americans to move to the neighborhoods in the first place required significant capital, money almost always procured through hard work and years of saving. This was ignored. White Americans labeled African-Americans as having a tendency to commit criminal activity, violence and prostitution.

African Americans were shuttered out of opportunities-even if they were the most qualified-which included moving into prime real estate areas. If African-Americans dared move into white areas, they were often met with psychological pressure and violence so that they would move back where they came from. Such is the power of stereotypes.

In the end, whites could not openly stem the tide of African-Americans moving out of the city. Housing discrimination was declared illegal through passing of civil rights' amendments. But today, Detroit is more segregated than any other metropolitan area in North America. What happened?

Danzinger, Holzer and Farley identify four reasons that people give for the persistence of the race divide in Detroit. These reasons are 1. Economic differences that lead blacks and whites to seek differently priced housing; 2. Blacks and whites may differ in their knowledge of the housing market so that blacks consider suburban areas outside their purchasing ability; 3. Each racial group just wants to stick to its own area; and 4.

Discrimination from real estate agents keeps the groups separate. Although it is now illegal, even today, blacks have to worry that even if they manage to move into a white area that they would face hate including destruction of their property and psychological intimidation.

Discrimination, including stereotyping and racial segregation, clearly has negative long-term consequences that Arabs and Muslims should take note of. Arabs and Muslims are the latest in a long line of caricatured minorities to be at the mercy of policy-makers who benefit from bigotry. In this case, those policy-makers represent a wide range of personalities and interests but are united in tolerating the open denigration of people of Middle Eastern descent or those who practice Islam, as part of a larger agenda.

Such rhetoric and images are valuable tools in shaping the hearts and minds of a public that is often times skeptical if politicians care for its best interests. The American coverage of the Israeli-Hizbullah Conflict of 2006 was one of the best examples of how this stereotyping contributed to a filtering of information available to the public.

Overall Coverage of the 2006 Israeli-Hizbullah Conflict

Coverage of the 2006 Israeli-Hizbullah Conflict was very heavily skewed in favor of the Israelis. This trend was seen across the country. However, bearing in mind that south-east Michigan has the highest concentration of people from the Middle East outside of the region, it was shocking to see that such negative images were presented on a daily basis by the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News, especially at the beginning of the conflict.

One would think that having such large and vibrant Arab American and Jewish communities nearby, both newspapers would take seriously the issue of depicting the conflict sensitively. Editors and writers at both newspapers surely are aware of Metro-Detroit being the most ethnically segregated city in America.

Instead of being even-handed in local coverage of the conflict, Detroit's media invariably portrayed it as a struggle between good (Israel) and evil (anyone opposing Israel). The coverage of the month-long conflict covered a number of events, yet the tone through out the first half of the month was tremendously pro-Israeli. Stereotypes were also de rigueur.

Coverage of the conflict revolved around a number of themes: that the Israelis were attacked first, that the Shi'i militia Hizbullah was a "state-within-a-state," that Israeli civilians were bravely facing their enemies (while the Lebanese remained largely faceless) and, contrary to all evidence, that the Israeli response to Hizbullah's capture of two Israeli soldiers was not disproportionate and that it was a natural extension of the "right to self-defense."

In the case of the Detroit News, it seemed that editorial page Editor Nolan Finley put his pro-Israeli bias on display for all to see which spurred somewhat of a backlash, not only from Arab-Americans but from the public at large. Although the coverage in both papers improved as the conflict went on and afterwards as well, the damage had already been done.

Since the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News are different publications, they are separated for the ease of the reader and to see the different ways in which pro-Israeli bias was present in each.

The Detroit Free Press Coverage

As mentioned, coverage revolved around a number of themes: that the Israelis were attacked first, that the Shi'i militia Hizbullah was a "state-within-a-state," that Israeli civilians were bravely facing their enemies while the Lebanese remained largely faceless and, contrary to all evidence, that the Israeli response to Hizbullah's capture of two Israeli soldiers was not disproportionate and that it was a natural extension of the "right to self-defense."

The Detroit Free Press' Niraj Warikoo-singled out largely in this paper as he was at least partially responsible for most of his newspaper's articles on the conflict-wrote in a July 14 article:

The second day of fighting between Israel and Hizballah militants quickly escalated into all-out warfare as Israel bombed the Lebanese capital's suburbs and crippled the airport, and bombed roads early today

leading from Beirut to Damascus, Syria. Hizballah - the militant group that kidnapped two Israeli soldiers Wednesday, setting off the fierce Israeli response - responded by firing more than 100 missiles into northern Israel.

Warikoo went on to add, "Hizballah's audacious raid Tuesday into Israel to capture soldiers - which followed another operation in Gaza by Palestinian militants that accomplished the same goal - set up this round of violence."

The problem with the way Warikoo frames the conflict here is that it begins with Hizballah's capture of the two Israeli soldiers. Hizballah and Israel were sworn enemies since the creation of the Shi'i militia in the 80s as the Lebanese Civil War raged. The Shi'i militia was organized to fight Israel after the state occupied Lebanon. The conflict by no means began with the altercation repeated so often by the American media as the cause for the fighting.

Israel itself crosses Palestinian and Lebanese borders with impunity and has captured thousands of Palestinians and Lebanese it deems as being enemies. Not to ignore what Israel's enemies have done, but Israel has itself committed numerous atrocities throughout the course of its history.

None of these were mentioned in the above article to give any sense of the longer term struggle taking place between the two forces.

At the very beginning, Warikoo's articles indicated an attempt to mention both Israeli and opposing positions. He noted that Hizballah is seen as heroic by many Lebanese for fighting the Israelis. However, Warikoo wrote about Hizballah in such a way that one might think it was exclusively supported by the Shi'a when in fact the movement has often been supported by factions of other religious communities also.

This was especially true by the end of the conflict when many Christians who had initially criticized the Hizballah for starting a war without consulting outsiders to the organization had their hometowns leveled and saw the Hizballah's continued stand as either a source of hope, a vindication of the group's capture of the Israeli soldiers or both.

Christians, Druze and Sunnis Muslims throughout the conflict provided shelter to fellow Lebanese and sought to protect them from Israel's onslaught. This rapprochement was also largely absent from the discourse.

The question of who should be quoted during the conflict also showed considerable bias. When showing the Lebanese side of the conflict, almost invariably it was Lebanese residing in America who were asked their opinions, not citizens of Lebanon proper. Lebanese people living in Lebanon were almost entirely absent from the discourse analyzed for this project. Israeli citizens on the other hand were constantly being interviewed.

This is problematic in that all Israelis regardless of their political or religious affiliation were portrayed as victims united by a common enemy but Lebanese were reported as divided into factions, not helping one another. Here is a typical example of how Israelis were portrayed:

Israeli leaders have warned that the battle could be a long one. They say that Israel will not accept a return to the conditions that existed before the fighting broke out, with Hizballah, not the Lebanese army, controlling Lebanon's southern border with Israel. ... Most northern Israeli cities are

now ghost towns. Residents have fled south, taking refuge in bomb shelters or remaining inside their homes. 'We never dreamed the terror would arrive here', Kamisa said as he inspected the damaged home. One Israeli man, Rafi Cohen, traveled north to show solidarity with people in the coastal town of Nahariya, which has been hit hard. But when he showed up at the beach, which is usually crowded on Saturdays in the summer, he was alone and a bit surprised. 'We should show Hizballah how strong we are and live our lives as normal', Cohen said.

Wrote Warikoo on July 14: "Some Christian Lebanese-Americans in metro Detroit also blamed Hizballah for the latest conflict. 'Lebanon is being held hostage by an armed militia that has not listened to the world' nor to Lebanese peace agreements, said Milad Zohrob, 53, of Redford Township. 'They are leading the people into a really horrible situation. And the people paying the price are the Lebanese civilians, not the militias'. Zohrob and others also said that Iran and Syria are supporting Hizballah and fomenting the current trouble."

It is often mentioned in the American media that one of the reasons Hizballah is considered a terrorist organization is that it bombed U.S. military barracks in Lebanon, killing over 200 soldiers. The issue of what the U.S. military was doing in Lebanon is not given the attention it deserves and it is often accorded the nebulous yet charitable title of "peace-keeping."

Warikoo did not make mention of that assertion in his July 14 article but he noted that the local Jewish population opposes Hizballah and considers the militia a "terrorist organization." Yet this treatment of the issue did not go into the issue of Israel's presence in Lebanon being illegitimate and Hizballah being created to drive out the Zionist state.

Hizballah to its credit had evolved since its creation into a political party and held a number of seats in the Lebanese parliament. Despite that, its important role in providing valuable social services, especially in the south of the country, was not highlighted and often received passing mention. Affinity to Hizballah was portrayed more often than not because of unreasonable hatred for Israel and not out of respect and affinity towards the organization's efforts to relieve poverty.

In this light, Hizballah's "kidnapping"-and which was pointedly never referred to as a "capture"-of the Israeli soldiers is seen by unaware readers as a completely unprovoked attack, a fight by terrorists supported by Iran on one side against Israel, a peaceful and threatened democracy on the other.

The fact that the U.S. forks over one-third of its foreign aid budget to Israel and that the two countries enjoy a "special relationship" was not questioned in the media. How the news was framed with Iran's support of the Hizballah being "ominous" while the mantra that "Israel had the right to defend itself" and that the U.S. would support Israel's right showed that Detroit newspapers had a serious agenda. Wrote Warikoo, "In [an] ... ominous sign that the struggle could spread, Israel accused Iran of helping fire a missile that damaged an Israeli warship, a charge Hizballah and Iran both denied."

Warikoo, Suzzette Hackney and David Crumm wrote an article on one of the first gatherings of Lebanese in Dearborn. To see such a small article-

Warikoo's next article ran over 1,000 words-on what was such an emotionally charged event, written in such sterile form, was shocking. The article about the Arab American event is in its entirety below.

Muslims attending a memorial service at a Dearborn mosque Sunday evening called upon businesses along Warren Avenue in Dearborn to shut down at 5 p.m. Tuesday to protest Israeli action in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. About 1,500 people attended the service at the Islamic Center of America in memory of 12 family members of a Dearborn family who died after a building in Lebanon was struck last week by an Israeli warplane.

Speakers at the service criticized Israel and asked the U.S. government to help U.S. citizens trapped in Lebanon.

With picture slides behind him showing the attacks in Lebanon, Ned Fawaz, chairman of the board of the Islamic Center, urged the crowd to "call Washington, call all your senators ... send e-mails" voicing opposition to Israel's actions.

Mohammad Bazzi of Dearborn Heights said that business owners are planning to shut down at the start of a march scheduled for Tuesday along Warren Avenue - the main commercial strip in east Dearborn.

In actuality, the event had been tremendously emotional with anger among attendees at a fever pitch. None of that came out in the Detroit Free Press article quoted above.

Sayyid Ibrahim Saleh, a Shi'i religious scholar, noted that Lebanon is not Shi'i, Sunni, or Christian, but an Arab country encompassing all of these religious communities. Saleh spoke passionately, noting that Imam Hussain-the grandson of Muhammad whose stand against the Ummayyad caliph Yazid is commemorated by the Shi'a-gave his blood, but is remembered for his principled stand against injustice even today. Christians and Muslims on the panel alike applauded him. In fact, it seemed almost everyone present in the audience, Christians and Muslims alike, applauded Saleh's remarks.

Saleh called for unity between Muslims and Christians to stand together and put an end to petty fighting and said that we are a people with "one position." Shouting, "Oh God, remove from us our horrible situation and make our feet firm to stand up for the truth," he received a standing ovation from the over 2,000 people present.

Reverend Rani Abdel Masseih of the Church of the Magnificent Life spoke next: "The truth that we are united behind has to do with truth and standing up for justice in the face of injustice. This is not just a Muslim or a Christian problem, it is affecting all of us Arabs," said Masseih.

Abed Hammoud, President of the Congress of Arab American Organizations and a Wayne County assistant prosecutor, gave the most impassioned speech of the evening. He said, "Those who are fighting us have no heart, and they have no mind, but we have a heart and a mind." Hammoud-who had two children trapped in Lebanon as he spoke-said, "Every kid deserves to be protected, not just American children. ... Israel is going to hell!" As the crowd cheered, he added, "I don't want to hear any more about Hizbullah, you've got a problem with them, go get them, don't go bombing the bridges and kids."

Although coverage also began to be more focused on whether the Israeli position during the conflict was worthy of defense, perhaps in part because of critical letters from readers. The Arab-American community, principally those of Lebanese descent, was quite vocal about what it saw as Israel's "disproportional response" to what was supposed to be a "kidnapping." The local media coverage still was tremendously skewed in favor of the Israelis but in the Detroit Free Press at least there appeared to be more of an attempt to portray the events fairly.

The day after the above event, another article by Warikoo, Hackney and Crumm came out. Although the previous day's event was not mentioned, there was a recognition that the Lebanese were suffering greatly. However, the focus was still mostly upon Lebanese who were American citizens, not human beings suffering as how Israeli citizens were portrayed. Lebanese citizens were largely absent from the reports.

Warikoo and Ben Schmitt finally followed up their story about what happened at the Islamic Center with a much more intense article regarding a rally in which a mostly Lebanese crowd of over 10,000 protestors took to Dearborn's streets. The article, titled "Crisis in the Mideast - In Metro Detroit: 10,000 Rally in Dearborn in Support of Lebanon," was much more accurate in its portrayal of Arab-Americans feelings regarding the conflict. The article noted that over 220 Lebanese and about 25 Israelis had been killed. It began by saying,

Carrying banners saying 'Stop Israeli Terrorism' and chanting antiwar slogans, some 10,000 people rallied in the center of metro Detroit's Arab-American community in Dearborn on Tuesday, demanding that the U.S. government put pressure on Israel to halt attacks in Lebanon. Although the protesters were peaceful, their message was strong, representing a profound difference of opinion between two of metro Detroit's most vital communities.

In portraying the above event, Warikoo and Schmitt did a much better job of showing that Israeli policies were causing pain, even if it was mostly a portrayal of pained Lebanese-Americans, and that there were many locals who supported Hizbullah in principle if not in practice. If the title of the article did not show much condemnation of the Israeli response, it might have been because editors, not writers, generally come up with the headlines. Even if the writers of the Detroit Free Press began seeing the conflict differently and addressing it in a way sensitive to both the pro-Israeli camp and its opponents, that would not affect whether the editors at the paper had changed their stance in any way.

As is usually the case in American media reports about attacks on Israel, an attempt to link the Holocaust with support for Israel was made in the above article. That the Jews suffered greatly as a result of the Holocaust is without question, but that the Holocaust can be brought up to dominate whatever policy decision is made in support of Israel is problematic on a number of levels. It is an act of reductionism to present Zionist Jews as bravely carrying on in the face of horrors that they are all too familiar with while the Israeli government's aggression against Arabs, both within the state and outside, is given token representation or not even mentioned.

The Detroit Free Press duly presented the line of thinking that the Holocaust had something to do with the Israeli-Hizbullah conflict as seen in a quote made by a local whose relatives were in Israel.

... [In] Farmington Hills, Hannan Lis called his parents, aunts, uncles and cousins in Haifa several times a day. 'We talk a few times a day', Lis said. 'My parents are concerned by these constant threats of missiles, but my parents also survived the Holocaust and lived through all the major wars Israel has faced, plus the wave of suicide bombings in the last five or six years that have been so dangerous. 'So far, they've decided to stay in Haifa even though there is a threat of missiles'.

An event taking place-a pro-Israeli rally at Southfield's Congregation Shaarey Zedek-garnered a notice that was larger than the story on the event at the Islamic Center (233 words). That was before the pro-Israeli event even took place. The event at the synagogue was covered in a longer article (690 words) with the headline, "Mid East Crisis Comes Home in Support of Israel: Southfield Crowd Says Fight's Right - 4,000 Gather, Urge Israelis Not to Yield to Terrorists." The article presented the pro-Israeli Jews who attended the event as believing that they were under an attack similar to that made against Jews by the Nazis.

The article mentioned that "many members of the Jewish community-and the U.S. government-consider Hizballah a terrorist group. And at the rally, a host of speakers, including Michigan Attorney General Michael Cox, said Israel's fight is America's fight." Not only that but "[the speakers] repeatedly compared the threat of Islamic extremism with the Nazis. The speakers also promised to keep fighting against what some called 'Islamo-fascism'. 'When our backs are against the wall, we are going to fight', declared Rabbi Martin Peled-Flax, an Israeli official, to loud cheers."

The Holders of Authority and Legitimacy in Mahdism Doctrine The Detroit News Coverage

Many in the business and political community view support of Israel as important. But what happens when news editors get in on the act? You end up with people like editorial page editor for the Detroit News Nolan Finley, who made many an incendiary comment against those who protested Israel's actions.

The Detroit News' coverage of the Israeli-Hizbullah conflict was similar to that of the Detroit Free Press although it seemed that the Detroit News was more sensitive to the feelings of the Lebanese early in the conflict. One July 13 Detroit News article was titled, "Local families fear for loved ones' safety - Metro Detroit Jews say Israel is doing what it has to do; Lebanese-Americans call actions aggressive."

The major difference in the coverage between the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News was how Finley showed his colors in several editorials. Rather than seeing the conflict for what it was, a highly controversial event affecting many locals, Finley used his pen to make a series of highly alarmist and extreme articles in support of Israel.

Editors in most American newspapers do not generally sign their names to such articles out of fear of losing credibility-but not Finley. He was single-handedly responsible for virulently pro-Israel material while also presenting stereotypical views of Arabs and Muslims.

Finley didn't develop his aggressiveness as a result of the Israel-Hizbullah conflict-he was already far to the right even before the conflict began. In a June 25 Detroit News editorial, titled, "Use nukes to keep the bad boys in line," Finley grossly simplified America's relations with "rogue states." He did not give any room for those states to note their grievances with the U.S. and reduced nations of millions to a few bogeymen that needed to be wiped out.

Finley did not mention what the fallout from the use of such nuclear weapons could do to civilian populations and seemed to think that such ideas are a sign of weakness. He wrote:

Witness the fact that we're wringing our hands while Iran's insane mullah posse, all hopped up on jihad, push defiantly ahead with a nuclear program they boast will 'wipe Israel off the map'. ... Or that our soldiers -- our sons and daughters -- are dying everyday in Iraq at the hands of an enemy that fights in sandals and makes bombs in the back of somebody's garage. Am I the only one who wonders:

Why don't we just nuke 'em? What good is all that shock and awe hardware if we aren't willing to use it to spare our own children from murderous butchers like the ones who mutilated two American soldiers in Iraq last week? Why do we waste our breath bargaining with nut balls like Kim Jong Il when in a blink of an eye we could make him disappear? The answer: Because we know as well as our enemies do that we'll never push the button. And so our amazingly potent hardware does us no good in deterring threats from rogue regimes.

America will never launch the Big One, unless someone drops a big one on us first.

Finley's article is delusional on a number of levels, not least because the U.S. is the only country that has used nuclear weapons, not only once, but twice against Japan during WWII. This use of "shock and awe hardware" was started by the U.S.-America never was responding to a nuclear attack when it used its weapons of mass destruction on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Finley goes on to state that the solution to deterring "regimes like Iran and North Korea" is the design and use of "smaller nukes" on those countries.

With such an openly aggressive pro-Israel stance, it should have been no surprise that Finley would have supported Israel's assault on Lebanon. In an article titled, "Israel's Right to Defense," Finley wrote, "The cries that Israel is wreaking a humanitarian disaster in Lebanon, wantonly killing innocents and destroying homes and infrastructure, are reaching a hysterical pitch." In a superb example of double-talk, Finley said that Israel had to be allowed to destroy Hizbullah, otherwise the "Lebanese people [would be] as vulnerable as they were before the fighting began."

Finley added:

When the smoke clears, Israel must have a wide buffer between itself and Hezbollah's Iranian supplied rockets. If Lebanon can't guarantee that safe space, then Israel must be free to do it itself.

... Compounding the hazard is Israel's tiny size. It's less than one-sixth the area of Michigan, with roughly the same amount of people. The enemy is always within shooting distance. If nothing else, we have relearned during the past two weeks that as long as there are Jews in the Middle East, someone will try to kill them.

Since when does a country being small mean that it is vulnerable? The American-backed Israel has the strongest military force in the Middle East. It is capable of easily crushing its neighbors whenever it sees fit. It would seem that Finley's notion of Israelis being beleaguered in relation to their neighbors is so lacking in evidence that he has to argue on the basis of the size of their country, an utterly clichéd and irrelevant point of debate.

Although there still were many letters to the Detroit News supporting Israel unconditionally, after Finley's "Support for Israel's defense" article, letters in opposition were seen more often. The Detroit News, to its credit, ran a number of letters criticizing Finley's position and also allowed guest editorials by Sheikh Mohammad Ali Elahi, the imam of Dearborn Heights' Islamic House of Wisdom, and Imad Hamad, director of the Michigan Chapter of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

Both Elahi and Hamad were highly critical of Israel's actions against Lebanon. Hamad was even able to say, "The disturbing fact is that people who are justifiably critical of Israel immediately become targets of harassment." However, this did not undo what Finley had said and he never apologized for his comments.

Conclusion

Most editors who are part of the mainstream western media are much more subtle if they support Israel because readers do not like to feel they are perusing propaganda. Regarding reporters, they are sometimes biased but often times may be ignorant. The same may be said about film producers.

However, in all cases, the negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims can be seen as a direct attack on the interests of al-Imam al-Mahdi's movement, which must be addressed.

One may take hope in Warikoo. He visited Lebanon on behalf of the Detroit Free Press after the conflict and his reporting since the trip was of markedly better-in this case meaning more balanced-regarding incidents involving Arabs and Muslims. He wrote several stories that showed far more empathy for Arabs and Muslims, including a piece titled "Stares, whispers take toll on metro Muslims - They tire of defending religion, ethnicity."

Perhaps part of the solution to cutting through ignorance regarding the Arab and Muslim world is that the Shi'a facilitate meetings and visits by dignitaries. Israel is far ahead of us in this regard and savvy when it comes to winning the hearts and minds of undecided policy makers.

The Israelis have invested time and money into speaking English and French fluently which are the lingua franca of intellectualism today just as Arabic and Persian were in the past. To speak Persian and Arabic is good and to be commended, but there is a time and place for everything and we must be flexible to address the rapidly evolving world we live in today.

Without our having a strong, principled media that operates with efficient and logical systems, it is difficult for nonbiased but ignorant reporters to maintain balance and hear our grievances. Reporters can be influenced by the same propaganda that many in the pro-Israeli lobby have skillfully produced and even very experienced and good hearted writers, although careful not to offend sensibilities ordinarily, may write the same kind of clichéd journalism that fuels stereotyping in the public. The world must know the truth about what we are, what we believe in and what we want to see.

American support of Israel may generally seem extreme and incomprehensible to outsiders, but it is the product of years of gradually ratcheting up paranoia in the American public about Arabs and Muslims.

Such paranoia does not make our cause any easier. In the days after 9/11, there was widespread support of the idea that Islam needed to be better understood and that by allowing terrorism to create splits in the public, the attackers/ terrorists would have achieved their goal of sowing chaos. There was sensitivity to the idea that perhaps Muslims and Islam would have to be addressed in more sophisticated terms than in the past. Sales of the Qur'an and books about Islam were all the rage.

However, today the bestsellers' lists are filled with anti-Islam and anti-Arab books, many relying upon the same old clichéd stereotypes of the past. Rather than address the important topics and address the rights and wrongs of both sides of the clash between the West and Islam, it is discouraging to see that for the most part, popular literature and media on the issue of Arabs and Islam are tremendously emotional, lacking in depth and perpetuating the notion that Arabs and Muslims are predisposed to violence.

The war on Iraq might not have taken place if emotional arguments based on conjecture rather than evidence had been screened out by the media. What the American media did was to amplify whatever anti-Arab and anti-

Islam biases existed in the population, reducing very the complex issues to a bogeyman-Saddam was a vicious dictator to be sure but hardly an ally of Al Qaeda-who was to be seen as the source of terrorism in America. With the fall of Saddam, the Iraqi people were to receive the Americans with open arms, throwing flowers and rose water. This did not happen. In fact, the opposite occurred.

Outside America there was almost universal opposition to the war, based on most of the concerns that Bush and his ilk ignored or ridiculed but now are known to be valid. For example, the French voiced the concern that the war in Iraq was doomed to failure with no plan for a civil war or the struggle spreading to other countries.

Instead of taking the idea seriously, it popularly became a sign of patriotism to refer to criticism of the war effort as being "French-inspired," a stance that the American media did not oppose.

But because the French were sophisticated in making their stance known, they have greater leverage today on the issues that matter. So to for that matter does Qatar because of Al Jazeera's active involvement, however biased that also maybe. The same cannot be said for the followers of al-Imam al-Mehdi. Many Americans, even at the highest levels of the government cannot tell the difference between a Shi'i or a Sunni. We may laugh, but our lack of placing representatives across the western world, trained in the ways of the media, is part of the problem.

As followers of al-Imam al-Mahdi, our community must make a more concerted effort to reach out to the ordinary people of the western world and in their languages if we are to assist our Imam in creating a platform for action there. By merely perpetuating misinformation and emotional appeals rather than a plan for action in doing this ultimately everyone involved loses out-and that is not only the followers of al-Imam al-Mahdi but the people who might come to our side inside American and Israeli borders.

Comparative Views on Mahdism The Divine vs The Human

Throughout the centuries mankind, by its own standards, has sought someone to bring justice as a means to peace and fulfilment. Leaders have come and gone, but impenitent man in his ignorance and futility still keeps seeking one who will bring victory over oppression. Sadly in many instances the justice sought has been driven by fallible conceptions and convictions; even, at times, worsened by cleverly-concealed ambitious desires.

This paper attempts to demonstrate firstly, that without the recognition of, and aid from the Lord of the Worlds, mankind will never have cognisance of true justice, true values, and thus no matter how much it struggles, will never attain understanding of that which it innately seeks.

Secondly, unless man returns to the pristine Pathway of Allah, he will find himself rudderless in a sea of disaster, in grave danger of not recognising the Chosen One, Imam Mahdi (a.s.), Imam of the Age, who is to lead mankind and establish justice and peace upon the Earth.

1.1 The Nature of Man

Created by Allah, man's existence was for a noble purpose as seen Qur'anically in Surah Al Hijr (15:26,28,29). Fashioned out of clay but breathed into by Allah, Lord of the Worlds, Adam (a.s.) the first man and recipient of the Divine life force was created in such a way that it was possible for him to attain the greatest heights of spirituality and intellect, receiving the capability of being the representative of Allah upon the Earth. This was acknowledged in aya 29 when it was said to the angels:

"When I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My Spirit, fall down in obeisance unto him". As if to reinforce this spiritual element of man's being, the same words are given in verse 72 of Surah 38.

Added to this spiritual element was the time spent with Allah in which He taught Adam, and even the angels acknowledged man's superiority over them in the attainment of this knowledge.

Nevertheless, in forgetting his origin and his Creator, man could revert to the lesser material, the clay which was ever part of him, and Iblis, the enemy of mankind, refused to bow to man basing his argument entirely on the reasoning of man's material constituent being inferior. Even the angels had questioned when told that man was to be created as Allah's Vicegerent on earth: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?" Surah Al Baqarah (2:30). This may be further emphasised by the fact that Allah has, to a large extent, given man free will.

It is man who must choose to fulfil his destiny with honour, and this may be seen in Surah Yunus (10:99) where Allah has stated the following: "If it had been thy Lord's Will, they would all have believed - all who are on the Earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind against their will to believe?" . Had Allah wanted blind obedience there were myriads of angels ever there to fulfil all that He commanded. Indeed, man was different, unique, and Allah answered the angels' question by stating, "I know that which ye know not!"

Therefore, to focus upon the baser material of man's origins would be to negate that most wonderful phenomenon - the spirit which Allah breathed into man, which has carried down through the generations over the thousands of years of man's presence upon the earth. This has been addressed by Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahheri in the following: "In Islam the spiritual element breathed into man during the Creation of Adam means that man must pass from the innately good to that which is evil.

Therefore, all of mankind has the propensity to turn to Allah."^[1] He elaborates on this, indicating the example of Firawn. He, and those like him, still had the opportunity to turn to Allah, as in Surah Naml (27:14), "They denied Our signs, though their souls acknowledged them." Of this aspect, Ayatullah Mutahheri likens their denial to a sort of revolution against their own consciences, with disbelief being the rejection of what their hearts believed.

Thus man may have travelled far down a pathway alien to that which is worthy and blessed, yet his soul acknowledges his spiritual need, even as his reason and actions deny such. We see indications of this recognition of the soul in the many legends which have been relayed through the ages, cultures and generations. The scenario is duplicated many times of the struggle between the Oppressor and the Righteous man who leads to victory and a bright future.

For those who have understanding, it is obvious that even in far-off lands, over many centuries, the need for Allah's leading, although perhaps heavily overladen with cultural romanticism and digressions, remains as a small ember awaiting the divine spark which will light the fires of understanding to bring forth those who will choose to follow Allah's ways and Allah's Vicegerent.

For those who do not have, or reject, spiritual understanding the unrequited longing of their souls hastens them down pathways away from Allah, to false deities and false Mahdi's of their choosing, for by nature man's very being requires him to worship. "Then set your face upright for religion in the right state - the nature made by Allah in which He has made men; there is no altering of Allah's creation..." Surah Al Rum (30:30).

1.2 The Pathway of Man as Commanded by Allah

"..as for those who believe in Allah and hold fast by Him, He will cause them to enter into His mercy and grace and guide them to Himself on a right path." Surah Al Nisa (4:175)

None can doubt the complexity of man's composition when analysing the sum of his constituent elements which comprises the physiological, the psychological and the spiritual. The scope of man's intellect and being has travelled far into the region of knowledge and capability, extending into religious, sociological, educational, scientific, industrial, political, economic, ecological, cultural, legal and governmental mores, all of which are interdependent, and lead into many further diverse areas requiring regulation and guidance. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that the One most able to understand and guide mankind is his Creator, Allah Most Merciful.

(a) Monotheism: Say: Verily my Lord hath guided me to a Way that is straight - a religion of right - the Path (trod) by Abraham the true in faith, and he (certainly) joined not gods with Allah." Surah Al An'am (6:161)

The first recognized step in this pathway is the acknowledgement of Islamic Monotheism, the fundamental belief in which Allah Alone is worshipped, having no partners nor yet is there any other God or one like Him upon whom one can call. The pathway of man as commanded by Allah is one in which recognition of, and obedience to Allah brings guidance and protection, and this may be seen in Surah Al Ikhlas - The Purity of Faith. All else is falsehood.

Imam Ali, Commander of the Faithful (a.s.) gives the following advice: Now then I advise you to fear Allah, Who created you for the first time; toward Him is your return, with Him lies the success of your aims, from Him terminate (all) your desires, towards Him runs your right path, and He is the goal of your fears (for seeking protection)...^[2]

(b) Islam: "... This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion." Surah Al Ma'idah (5:3)

Islam, the essence of monotheistic belief, is the religion which Allah has chosen for mankind, and which was, as stated in the Qur'an, the religion given to the Prophet Ibrahim (a.s.) and those Prophets and Messengers chosen by Allah to follow on.

It was perfected during the life of the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) and its vast stores of knowledge, laws, and admonition for mankind have been passed down through the centuries, being relayed and interpreted for the believers of each age by Allah's chosen Representatives since that time.

Imam Ali (a.s.) speaks of it thus: "Have you fully realised what Islam is? It is indeed a religion founded on truth. It is such a fountain-head of learning that several streams of wisdom and knowledge flow from it. It is such a lamp that several lamps will be lighted from it. It is a lofty beacon illuminating the path of Allah...."

(c) The Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.): "O Prophet! Truly We have sent thee as a Witness, a Bearer of Glad Tidings, and a Warner." Surah Al Ahab (33:45) On the pathway of Allah we cannot advance, nor yet hope to attain spiritual fulfilment, neither is one's future secure at all without knowledge of, and love towards the holy Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.).

The final Prophet of Allah, who, of all Prophets, alone was given the responsibility, as seen even in previous scriptures, of being the mercy for mankind in its entirety. His position has been established by the Word of Allah, in which it is said: We have not sent thee but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most men understand not. Surah Saba' (34:28)

The Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) was not only the Receiver and Conveyor of the Message from Allah, but Judge and Statesman. He led the prayers of the people, educated them, administered divine justice between them, and issued orders as the leader of their society in war and peacetime. So important is the rank of this Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.) that there are many texts requiring obedience to him, such as Surah Al Nisa (4:80) in which it is

said: He who obeys the Messenger obeys Allah. In fact, if one only refers to texts using the Arabic verb *Ata'a* meaning "to obey", one immediately finds 27 verses which exhort obedience to the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) as being obedience to Allah. Therefore the position of the Holy Prophet in the way of Allah is of paramount consequence.

1.3 The fulfilment of Allah's promise

It is in the worship of Allah and sincere obedience to his Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) that Allah's promise of guidance and mercy may be found. The Almighty has never allowed man to be left unprotected, without light and guidance. Even during long passages of time there were signs, scriptures and Messengers for those who retained faith in Allah. As reminded by Ayatullah Mutahheri, The Prophets and the Imams have been described as the main routes and the straight path, the sign-posts for the people, the light houses in the land, the guides to the way of Allah, the preachers of His message and the proclaimers of what He likes.^[3]

This Light and Mercy did not disappear with the death of the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) nor yet was there confusion over this issue for those of belief. This may be seen in the words of the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) prior to his death beside the pond of Khumm on the 18th of Zhul Hijjah after the Farewell Pilgrimage: "It seems as if I have been summoned and I am going away. However I am leaving among you two weighty things, one of which is greater than the other. They are the Book of Allah the Almighty, and my children. So take care how you treat them after me.

The two shall never part company until they come to me at the Pool. The Lord, Allah, the Almighty, is my Master and I am the master of every true believer." Then he took the hand of Ali in his hand and said: "He is the master of those whose master I have been. O Allah, love those who love Ali and hate those who hate him..."^[4] This was not a capricious pronouncement prompted by nepotism or brought about by his love of Ali(a.s.), though there can be no doubt that certainly he did love him - this was by command of Allah with far-reaching consequences as deeper study reveals.

After Imam Ali, Commander of the Faithful (as.) would be those of the progeny of the Prophet (s.a.w.) through his and Fatemah's (a.s.) line, and this is noted in further reports from a number of sources, as in the following: The Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) said: Behold! My Ahl-ul-Bayt are like the Ark of Noah, whoever embarked in it was saved, and whoever turned away from it was drowned.^[5]

The Holy House (a.s.) was to prevail, not through Prophethood but Imamate - Spiritual Leadership and Governance. With each generation has been the Imam, the Wali, the Master of the Age, the one Perfect man whose purity and knowledge and nearness to Allah gives guidance to the Believers. With the occultation of Imam Mahdi (a.s.) the twelfth Imam, has come the promise of his re-appearance through which Allah, is to bring back justice and righteousness to the Earth.

He, himself, has said: "I am Al-Mahdi, and I am the Still-living one who will establish justice throughout the world the same as it has been filled with oppression. Surely the earth will never remain without a witness, and people

will not live in lack of a leader. Thus do not retell this except for your Muslim brothers who are Men of God".^[6]

2.1 Man's tendencies to follow false pathways

He Who taught (the use of) the pen - taught man that which he knew not. Nay! But man doth transgress all bounds in that he looketh upon himself as self-sufficient. Verily to thy Lord is the return (of all). Al 'Alaq (96:4-8).

Qur'anically man who chooses to live without spiritual ethics is unappreciative. Created, nurtured and sustained by Allah, as stated, man is ungrateful, arrogant to the point of ignorance, rebellious, putting his own will before the Almighty, from Whom he came, and to Whom he is finally to return...Then see you such a one as takes as his god his own vain desire? Al Jathiya (45:23).

Obedience to Allah's commands brings safeguards, thus while obedience is mandatory, science has often revealed that these commands are demonstrably beneficial. Discussion of dietary laws is not intended here, nevertheless there is a very thought-provoking text in connection to this aspect of obedience: "And do not eat of that on which Allah's name has not been mentioned,

and that is most surely a transgression; and most surely the Shaitans suggest to their friends that they should contend with you; and if you obey them, you shall most surely be polytheists (idol-worshippers)." Surah Al Anam (6:121). Clearly it is a warning for man not to place the influence or advice or commands of any other being above the words and commands of Allah, for the outcome of such is polytheism.

We are also reminded that man is not without an Enemy, and the vow of the Shaitan was : "I will lie in wait for (ambush) them on Thy Straight Way..." Surah Al Araf (7:16). We who are Muslim cannot claim immunity, but must be ever vigilant, remembering that the vowed ambush would not take place on a by-way, but on Allah's Straight Path. It is not surprising therefore that the followers of Islam have diverged into many pathways.

Dealing with Degrees of Polytheism, which is a major recurrent theme in man's history, Ayatullah Muttaheri states: "Now we can comprehend what the Holy Prophet meant when he said that infiltration of polytheism into belief is as quiet and imperceptible as the crawling of an ant on a smooth (black) stone in the darkness of night.

The fact is that the dividing line between monotheism and polytheism is the relationship between Allah on the one hand and man and the world on the other. This relationship is that of "from Him" and "to Him". In the theoretical monotheism the line of demarcation is "from him". We are all from Allah."^[7]

2.2 Historical Evidence of false pathways

"Mankind was but one people; so Allah sent the prophets as bearers of good tidings and as warners, and He sent down with them the book with the truth, so that it might judge between the people in that in which they had differed. And none differed about it but the very people who were given it, after clear signs had come to them, revolting among themselves; whereupon

Allah guided, by His will, those who believed, to the truth about which they differed..." Surah Al Baqarah (2:213)

Of the above verse, al-Allamah as-Sayyid at-Tabatabai' comments: "This verse explains why religion was promulgated and mankind obliged to follow it, and why differences occurred in it. Mankind,...were in the beginning one single group. Then occurred differences about the acquisition of the necessities of life." This earliest religion for mankind was expanded and enhanced by the sending of Prophets, but again there was deviation. "

...

This time about the knowledge of religion, or about matters concerning the beginning and end of mankind. Thus, religious unity was disrupted and various groups appeared on the scene, and their differences contaminated other aspects of life. These second differences only occurred because of the revolt of the very people who were given the book, after the fundamentals and characteristics of religion had been fully explained to them, and the proof of Allah had been completed for them." ^[8]

Clearly, there were initially two reasons for the differences within mankind from which others branched: (a) desire for worldly gains, which he considered as a natural phenomenon and (b) religious differences, which were not natural, but based on the revolt of mischief-makers.

Religious deviations

The religious history of mankind reveals that not only have religious differences crept into the purity of religion, but in many cases further alienation has existed because of those who have been motivated by politics and avarice to deceive themselves and/or the people. We are reminded of Ayatullah Muttaheri's words: Sometimes a religious creed is misused in a social system.^[9]

In any case divisions, many of which have been accompanied by bloody battles, have marred the essence of religion of those in the past. On the other hand, there are those who have gradually grown away from the Path, replacing it with a cultural by-way. Whatever the case, today we witness a mere glimmer of that which had once been a powerful glow.

Hindusim, Buddhism and tribal cultures

Taking into account some of these areas regarding religious differences, we should mention that Hinduism and Buddhism still exhibit some areas within their ancient books which allude to a time when polytheism was not their focus. Tribal cultures also appear to contain elements of a past monotheism.

Judaism

Unlike the previously-mentioned religions, Judaism^[10], as we now describe it, originated from an identifiably pure source as seen with Prophet Abraham (a.s.) and was passed on by the Will of Allah through major and minor Prophets (a.s.), as is witnessed Qur'anically: "We did aforetime grant to the Children of Israel the Book, the Power of Command, and Prophethood; We gave them for sustenance things good and pure; and We favoured them above the nations." Surah Al Jathiyah (45:16).

However, as also witnessed Qur'anically, those who were entrusted with this Pathway of Allah fell away from His Truth. So far did they fall that we see, even in their scriptures where human sacrifice, for a time, became part of their ritualistic belief.^[11] Their un-Godly Pathway was prompted by their arrogance and wilfulness,

and Allah has given us this insight into their thought processes: "...they inherited the Book, but they chose the vanities of this world saying: (everything) will be forgiven us" Surah Al A'raf (7:169). Had they chosen to remain on the Straight Pathway it would have led them, even as their Scriptures testified, to acceptance of the the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) and the perfection of Islam.

>From Judaism have come a number of sects - today's orthodox branch of Judaism has stemmed from Pharisaism, the prevailing religion at the time of Jesus (a.s.). Branches of Judaism include the ascetics and Cabalists with their esoteric teachings, as well as the modernists who want an end to male circumcision and the Sabbath, and the upholding of what is known sin (in reality they have completely dispensed with all the old teachings referred to as Torath Yahveh or Yirath Yahveh - see note 10);

Zionism is not an accepted religious branch of Judaism, being more a political faction and is, in fact, dismissed as heretical by the true orthodoxy while being eagerly accepted by irreligious Jews. However, a growing

number of Rabbi's and sects are teaching that unless Zionism is a part of their system of belief, they are not true Jews.

Christianity

Digressions in Christianity came early in its existence. History will testify to the fact that for a short time during the early Christian era, the true Church responded to the needs and teachings of the people. However, with the Rome-centred deviation and spread to the farthest reaches of the known world, the truth became anathema and alarming philosophies and practices became orthodoxy with devastation for those who believed otherwise.

In Christianity monotheism was supplanted by polytheism. Of this the Qur'an makes mention: "They take their priests and their anchorites to be their Lords in derogation of Allah, and they take (as a deity) Christ the son of Mary; Yet they were commanded to worship but One God: There is no God but He." Surah Al Tawbah (9:31)

Digression from monotheism and Divine Guidance, brought corruption and arrogance. History witnessed great wealth and power in the hands of the ruling Popes; the merging of Church and State, through client Royals; loss of social justice with vast gulfs between the rich and poor; resultant slavery; denial of education to the common people, and anathematisation of science as being evil.

History elaborates on the many military forays into unknown regions, blessed and financed by the church; wars waged on countless unsuspecting indigenous populations the most famous of these holy wars, the Crusades, promising immediate absolution for those who would rescue the Holy Land from the evil Muslims.

Today's Christianity owes its survival to several factors: (a) the commencement in the 13th Century Renaissance lasting approximately 300 years, in which ordinary people demanded their rights to education, skills and cultural learning. (b) The Seventy Years Captivity which commenced in 1305 with a French Pope, Clement V being crowned in Lyon,

and the papal court being moved from Rome to Avignon in 1309 where it remained throughout the reign of the next seven Popes, ending in 1377 with return of the papal throne to Rome under Pope Gregory XI. (c) The Reformation in 1517 with Martin Luther's stand against certain Church practices, and from which the Protestant movement sprang. The Reformation went further, questioning Church dogma, with reinterpretation and publishing of Scriptures, a blow to the established Church from which she has never fully recovered.

It must be noted that none of the above factors, the Reformation included, brought back the monotheism taught by Jesus (a.s.). Hence its polytheism continued, in essence preventing recognition of the revealed truth of Islam, still leading man away from salvation. Shifts in Christian religious beliefs have continued and may be seen in innumerable diverse sects and cults. Man's spiritual desire for monotheism may be seen in the large numbers of adherents leaving the churches, searching for religious substance.

Contemporary New Age Religions

Cults: It would be very remiss not to mention the "New Age" cults and religions which are gaining sway throughout the world, particularly the Western world at this time. Many appear to be a melange of elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, Wicca (witchcraft), Gaia worship (Earth worship), Goddess worship and further hocus pocus, mostly influenced by Pantheism.

Pantheism et al. : Recognising that Pantheism is an ancient cult, it is included because of its far-reaching effect in newly-merging cults, even in some modern Christian teachings. In Pantheism we note that "God" is in everything and everything is God. Therefore, one may live as one chooses, for to obey one's instincts and desires is to be obedient to "God". Seemingly in conflict is what is termed Deep Ecology in which the inherent belief is that man is of no more intrinsic value than an animal or plant, etc. However, if pantheism over-rides, then all are equally "God" .

Further into this aspect is that which is now designated as "speciesism". An interesting quotation from financier, Sir James Goldsmith gives further indication of this: No matter how brilliant the technological revolutions, no matter how useful the economic and political initiatives, there can only be hope if man cast away his anthropocentric delusions... and find his place in nature." ^[12]

Speciesism states that man must remember that he is no more valuable than a blade of grass or an ant. Therefore we find man being tossed from one extreme to another - from God to insect! For him to consider his origin as being of special significance and nobility, is a view regarded as harmful and incorrect.

Goddess and Gaia worship: An article in the Religion column of (U.S.)Time magazine May 6, 1991 headed When God was a Woman, with the sub-heading Worshippers of Mother Earth are part of a Goddess resurgence, mentions the following: "To mark Earth Day last week, four women and two men stood on a hilltop outside Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, literally praying to Mother Earth....."

The ceremonies were part of a growing U.S. spiritual movement, Goddess worship, the effort to create a female-centred focus for spiritual expression. Most participants are women who seek a deity other than God the Father, and a faith less patriarchal than the Judeo-Christian tradition seems to offer. Adherents claim the movement involves as many as 100,000 U.S. women. Isis or Astarte are often invoked, [though]most worship a vague generic "Goddess" often depicted as Mother Earth or Gaia, in line with environmental awareness.....some old-line churches are opening up to the Goddess".

Feminism: It is notable that in one North American mosque, Islam has been tainted by Feminism, having a female muezzin and a female Imam to lead the prayers. Certainly placing women's un-Islamic desires for leadership ahead of obedience to Allah, upholds what has been written by Imam Ali, Commander of the faithful (a.s.): Do not obey them even in good things so that they may not attract you to evils. ^[13]

Syncretism: Syncretism, classified as "Religion of all Religions". This is not Islam but "the blending of the best of all religions".... reminding of the Pagan Meccans when they suggested to the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) that they

would bow down and worship "his god" if he would worship theirs. Syncretism is part of a global agenda reported by the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Dr. W.A. Visser 't Hooft as such:

The word syncretism should be reserved for another type of religious attitude which deserves to have its own name because it is such an important, persistent and widespread religious phenomenon.

This is the view that holds that there is no unique revelation in history, that there are many different ways to reach the divine reality, that all formulations of religious truth or experience are by their nature inadequate expressions of that truth, and that it is necessary to harmonize as much as possible all religious ideas and experiences so as to create one universal religion for all mankind." [14]

Islam's inflexibility in this regard is being questioned, even by some Muslims, as other religions adjust belief to fit a global theology. Interfaith organisations are working towards this end with the development of a new "Interfaith Ministry". Prayers intoned have segments from all religions, and one phrase used in a recent combined prayer was "La Illaha Illallah, Muhammadan Rasoolollah" which so completely negated every other polytheistic utterance - obviously this phrase has not been understood by the authors of the prayer. We await with interest the day their vision is unveiled.

2.3 Human responses to deviations - revolutions without divine guidance

Man who is unschooled in true spiritual matters has no base from which he may judge matters of spiritual significance. This does not prevent him from using his natural inclination towards justice in which he may determine that ills have resulted from religious deviations. This has tended to lead man to discard religion entirely without searching for truth, at times proclaiming it to be the causation of all ills.

One result of religious digression, Revolution without the guidance of Allah, may be seen as the great swing away from religion itself. Prompted by social injustice wearing the guise of religion, the swing away from "religion" after the reformation, continued in the direction of politics free of religion. In eighteenth century France, revolution took place during which time thousands of aristocrats were executed, including the King, who had claimed the Divine Right of Kings. During this time that an ugly scene was enacted wherein a prostitute was lifted high above the cheering crowds and given the title, "Goddess of Reason".

Atheism finds ready root in this fertile soil. Other revolutions were the direct result of uprising against unjust and oppressive regimes labeled as having had Divine favour. While freedom may be the primary goal, materialism appears to transcend it, and Marx, for example, believed that freedom is nothing except consciousness of historical necessity.

Although an intellectual, he never appeared to give credence to the higher essence of man, or a Higher power. As late as 1986 another former Russian President, Mikhail Gorbachev is reported as saying: We must lead a determined struggle against religion, and we must reinforce atheist propaganda" [15]

The upholding of atheistic policy, even while upholding human rights values and ethics, eventually leads to destabilisation - usually this comes about due to man's unfailing tendency towards tyranny in order to control the multitudes.

3.1 Responses to revolutions and wars - the UN and its background

Man's condition without spiritual guidance has caused pain and tribulation upon the Earth. It was not without reason that Allah has instructed us of man's many failings. The greatest of these with regard to human Society is his propensity toward tyranny and war. Therefore, Society has had to look for ways in which to curb the outcome of this evil.

As early as 1307 the French legislator, Pierre Dubois drafted a plan for forming a union of Christian nations under the lead of the King of France. However, there have always been those who have believed in unity for mankind as a whole, and in contemporary times the principle is to seek peace through global unity, irrespective of religion.

The late 19th, and early 20th centuries saw Western European efforts for prevention of war through the Hague Conferences, which proved unsuccessful with the outbreak of the First World War. In 1918, associations to prevent wars were formed in Europe and sections of early treaties, namely Westphalia and Vienna, were included in the Versaille peace treaty, as well as proposals for a League of Nations which was formalised on 1st January 1920 with a membership of 28 Allied and 14 neutral States.

This membership later increased to some 60 States. The purpose was to prevent future wars by establishing relations on a basis of justice and honour, promoting co-operation and supplying material and intellectual aid. The official seat was Geneva and the official languages French and English.

As organisations before it, the League of Nations proved not only inadequate, but in some aspects its decision-making and lack of control were considered negative. Its failure is considered to have been due to cases wherein "vital interests" of powerful totalitarian nations were involved. Only the minor states were pressured to obey the League. The final Assembly was held on April 8th 1946.

UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations came about in response to the failure of the League of Nations but its aims did not change. Representatives of nations opposed to Germany, Italy and Japan, met in San Francisco in April 1945, working on what we now know to be the Charter of the United Nations which was signed in June 1945. The UN was established on October 24th, 1945 before the end of the Second World War, and before the final League of Nations Assembly.

The UN Charter has many fine aspects relating to the maintaining of peace on the basis of justice, with promotion of friendly relations and co-operation in all matters for all nations. There is also commitment to the collective encouragement for respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.

Nation Members are encouraged to settlement of disputes where peace and justice are not compromised. It is said that States that are not members are also to observe the same principles, although the UN has no jurisdiction in the internal affairs of States unless the UN Council is taking action to settle a dispute. World Health, Education, Affairs in respect of Women and Children, even of religion, receive attention in Covenants which are duly ratified by member States.

Some authors have considered the UN Charter to be approaching the excellence of civil laws relating to governance and justice, which were designed by Imam Ali (a.s.). Nevertheless, there are some UN Covenants, sections and statements which may be regarded as ambiguous, or may even translate into actions being disadvantageous, depending on perspective.

Therefore, we are reminded of the fact that although of the highest degree of excellence, it is still the works of men's hands. Looking at the personalities of men who have had the most to do with this charter and this organisation, one cannot but see that it has not been brought about through obedience to the Creator, but as a very clever interpretation of mankind's contemporary needs.

One personality who had a great deal to do with the UN, being the first Director of UNESCO, was Sir Julian Huxley. His academic and scientific record is impeccable and many of his writings show that he was a man of intellect, a great man by human standards, an Evolutionist who advocated scientific principles to moral, social and political issues. We gauge further of his feelings on the spiritual and eternal in the following: In the evolutionary pattern of thought, there is neither need nor room for the supernatural.

The earth was not created; it evolved. So did all the animals and plants that inhabit it, including our human selves, mind and soul as well as brain and body. So did religion. *The Humanist Frame* (1961) p. 18

3.2 UN in practice as opposed to its charter

While recognising the charter and its very important Human Rights statements we question: Does the UN function more effectively than earlier charters and conventions? Certainly it has remained for a longer period of time than past similar organisations.

There have been times when the UN has, as in the case of the League of Nations, been unable to withstand the contentions and actions of strong nations. In many instances it has been referred to as a "paper tiger". This is particularly so in recent years with the growing strength of the US together with its allies. We have noted the complete rejection of the UN stand regarding certain nations, and the UN's inability to make reply and to prevent wars. We have noted in some instances that injustice is not perceived, and rejection of its mandates goes without penalty.

Or in other instances the UN has delivered a just decision and in later years this decision has been revoked by members with a different agenda.^[16] In 1850 an erudite William Penn said: Either nations will be governed by God or they will be ruled by tyrants. This is the case with nations undoubtedly, but what of the UN?

4.1 False Mahdism from non-religious viewpoint, political and apolitical

The coming of a Saviour from the non-religious point of view within the framework of politics: (a) One would have to consider that in many instances man is placing his trust in the UN as a body which will ultimately save the Earth through wise governance(b) On the other hand there are those who believe that the UN will make way for the coming New World Order which will bring salvation for those on Earth. This latter theory makes way for a tyrannical form of world Government.

4.2 False Mahdism from religious aspect

As seen in section 2.2 there are many false teachings. Of Judaism we find the belief of "The Messiah". This doctrine does not accept of what is known of Imam Al Mahdi (a.s.), so it is reasonable to suppose that it is a false Mahdi.

In Christianity there are several beliefs regarding the return of Jesus (a.s.) but there is no teaching which equates with Imam Mahdi (a.s.). Some go as far as to preach against any that would rise up in such circumstances, for all other than Jesus (a.s.) will be false. However, there are those who believe that the return of "Jesus" will place Jews at the head of world government.

Of the New Age religions there are several areas of concern: In Gaia worship it is taught that God is to "mate" with Mother Earth and Lord Matreya will come forth. This would have to qualify as a false Mahdi as he is to save the Earth. Syncretists have probably forgotten any need at all for a Mahdi, as they have all the love and peace and are working on formulating the "best of religions"; Pantheist-based religionists see no need whatsoever for salvation after all they are "one with God and nature".

>From the point of view of Islam we know that there have been false Mahdi's in the past, and no doubt in the future it is possible where the pathway has been diverted.

5. Conclusion: Recognition of true Mahdi (a.s.) and its outcome

"Allah has promised to make those of you who believe and do good deeds, successors in the land, as He has made those before them, and will establish their religion which He has chosen for them and change their fear into security. They will worship Me, and ascribe nothing as a partner to Me. Those who disbelieve are the wicked indeed." Surah An-Nur (24:55) This verse which refers to the establishment of a Just, and Righteous, Government by Allah's Vicegerent, our Imam of the Age (a.s.), undoubtedly is the promise for which the soul of mankind longs. We note again the repeated theme of Islam, monotheism and remember the commands and decrees of Allah which accompany it.

Over the centuries Believers have been told of Imam Mahdi (a.s.) and the great events which will occur when he appears to mankind. The Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) told of his coming(a.s.): Allah will raise a man from my progeny, from my Ahlul-Bayt, by whom the earth will be filled with justice thoroughly, just as it has been filled with injustice and oppression^[17], identifying him : Al Mahdi is from my progeny from the sons of Fatima (a.s.)^[18]

All Muslims have knowledge of this to some extent - though differences remain in traditional understanding of the birth and history of the 12th Imam(a.s.). The Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali (a.s.) has quoted the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) as saying, Happiness is for the one who will attend the Gha'im of my Ahlul-Bayt and will follow him before his rise.

This person will love his lovers and hate his enemies, and will accept the leadership of the Imams from before his advent. These ones are my friends, and are the most sincere members of my Ummah whom I honour very much."^[19] In some of the other collections we see the following: The Holy Prophet (pbuh) said: "The person who dies and has not known the Imam of his time has died the same as one who died during the Age of Ignorance."^[20]

The Imam of our Age, Imam Al Mahdi (a.s.) is , by the determination and Command of Allah to bring a Governance which will restore the order of mankind and the Earth. For us to be unaware of this vital part of our religious heritage is to place us in danger of Jahilliyah, not only in death, but in the way we live and in our system of values.

This era has witnessed turmoil of immense proportions worldwide. Morality and decency have been lost and justice has dwindled. Humanity staggers from one terrifying calamity to another and the world itself is reeling under the weight of wretchedness. Mankind has truly entered dark days. The door of hope is that of the return of our Imam (a.s.).

However, the timing is with Allah, and we do not know how long we will have to wait. Nevertheless, even to be awaiting his deliverance gives us hope and prevents despair. As has been quoted by Ayatollah Ibrahim Amini in his book, Imam Zain Al-Abideen (AS) has been reported to have said, "To hope for deliverance and release in itself functions as the most profound form of deliverance."

References:

- [1] Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahheri, Man and Universe, p.86
- [2] Imam Ali, Nahjol Balagha (compiled by Sayyid Shareef ar-Razi) Sermon 197
- [3] Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahheri, Man and Universe, p.96
- [4] Al-Hakim, Al-Mustadrak, vol.3 p.109.
- [5] Ibid, vol.3 p.151; Ibn Hajar, Al-Sawaiq al-Muhriqah, pp. 184,234;
- [6] Kamal-ud-Din, p.445
- [7] Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahheri, Man and Universe, p.95
- [8] Al-Allamah as-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn at-Tabatabai, Al- Mizan, vol. 3 pp. 167,168
- [9] Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahheri, Man and Universe , p.85
- [10] Originally known as Torath Yahveh (instruction or moral law revealed by Yahveh) or Yirath
Yahveh (the fear and reverence of Yahveh (Allah))
- [11] Bible - Old Testament - Jer. 7:30,31
- [12] Sir James Goldsmith, 1989 Adam Smith Lecture, London., as reported in The Roman Chronicle
Bolton, England, No. 57, December 1989.
- [13] Imam Ali, Nahjol Balagha, Sermon 79.
- [14] Dr. W.A. Visser 't Hooft, No Other Name: The Choice Between Syncretism and Christian
Universalism, p.11.
- [15] F. Thorn, Gorbachev's Politics of Religion, The Salisbury Review, England, Spt. 1988, p.46.
- [16] Resolution 3379 (1975) qualified Zionism as a form of racism. This was revoked by resolution 4686 in 1989.
- [17] Al-Musannif, vol 11, p.371; Also found in Sahih Muslim and Sahih Bukhari
- [18] Sunan Abu Dawud, Vol.4, p.107
- [19] Bihar-ul-Anwar, vol.52, p.129
- [20] Musnad-I-Ahmad-ibn-Hanbal, vol.2p.83, vol. 3, p.446, vol.4,p.96; Sahih Bukhari vol.5,p.13;
Sahih Muslim vol.6,p.21, no.1849.

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