

In the name of Allah

Some Responses of Islamic Shi'i Messianism to the Challenges of Life's Meaning

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Abstract

One of the most serious challenges facing humanity today is the question of the meaning of life, to which various solutions have been proposed by experts. This article employs an exploratory research method to examine different aspects of Messianism, particularly Islamic-Shiite Mahdism, and to identify the elements that enhance meaning in human life. According to this research, such a belief can provide meaning from a supra-religious perspective by offering hope, realizing humanity's long-standing ideals, and forming a universal government. Additionally, from the specific perspective of Islam, particularly Shiism, the beliefs surrounding Mahdism—such as a focus on justice, an emphasis on human dignity, the belief in a living and present Imam, and the necessity for purposeful effort and patience—can profoundly enhance the meaning of life.

Keywords: Meaning of life, Suprareligious Messianism, Islamic Messianism, Mahdism, Mahdism and Existential Meaning.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the debate about the meaning of life is not a new topic, and its history can be found in the discussions of philosophers as well as in the teachings of various religions. However, the various challenges of the last century, both in the theoretical field (such as the new discussions in existential philosophy and, consequently, among analytic philosophers) and in the social field (such as the growth of nihilism and its consequences, such as depression or suicide in human societies), have given this question a new face and have provoked wide-ranging discussions among philosophers and experts.

The approaches to this question have not been the same among experts; based on subjective assumptions, according to some authors, the totality of views on the meaning of life can be divided into the following three types 1. The meaning of life in terms of its purpose; 2. The meaning of life in terms of its function; and 3. The meaning of life in terms of its value. (Bayat, 2011, 54-57) These approaches are based on assumptions and intellectual foundations, all of which, according to Metz, can be categorized into two types: supernaturalism¹ and naturalism.²

¹. This group considers the existence of God, the soul, the afterlife, etc. to be necessary for the meaning of life.

². In contrast to the supernaturalists, they consider the existence of this material world sufficient for the meaning of life. (Regardless of whether metaphysical things exist or not) It should be noted that Metz himself divides naturalism into two groups: Subjectivism and Objectivism. In subjectivism, the meaning of life varies from person to person depending on their perspective. Objective naturalists believe that the meaning of life can be explained, at least in part,

(Metz 2013, 19-20) Meanwhile, various experts have proposed and examined suggestions regarding the meaning of human life, including concepts such as being valuable, happy, purposeful, and useful.¹

It is natural that by accepting religious propositions, the meaning of life becomes more similar to theistic supernaturalism; (Mohammadi Monfared, 2011, 119-120) However, some religious teachings can be used to suggest the meaningfulness or enhancement of the meaning of life, which can be justified even in objective or subjective types of naturalism. Since one of the common teachings among many religions is the belief in a savior, this article aims to explore the impact that the belief in the coming of a savior—specifically Islamic-Shiite Mahdism—can have on providing meaning to life.

Some researchers have already done work on the topic discussed in this article, including the article "The Role of Mahdism in the Meaningfulness of Shi'ite Life" (2012) by Ali Allah Badashti, "Recognizing the Components and Factors of Meaningfulness of Life in the Mahdist Rule" (2019) by Ahmad Karimi, "The Role of Belief in Mahdism in Giving Meaning to Individual Life" (2018) by Ahmad Reza Miftah and Nasser Mohammadi, and the articles "The Conceptual Basis of Shi'ite Salvationism on the Meaning of Divine Supernatural Life" (2011) and "The Meaning of Life, Nihilism, and the Thought of Mahdism" (2008) by Behrouz Mohammadi Monfared. However, apart from the difference in the subject matter and the views of some authors, it seems that the work done is insufficient for the following reasons: adopting a completely intra-religious and not extra-religious view that encompasses global public challenges and can create a common discourse with an audience unfamiliar with the school of Islam and Shi'ism; one-dimensionality; incomplete induction and ultimately, unstaged and undifferentiated. The current article attempts to address the above shortcomings and promote extra-religious discourse to provide a meaningful model for a global challenge by utilizing the great potential of Mahdism.

According to the above, in this article we will first discuss the response of the Messianism of religions (in general and regardless of the specific religion) to the question of the meaning of life. Then we will refer to the areas that Islamic Messianism offers for giving meaning to life, and finally we will discuss the areas that the Shi'ite Messianism or Mahdism perspective can offer specifically in response to the question of the meaning of life. The method employed in this article is exploratory research², which involves examining various aspects of belief in the Savior to identify elements that effectively contribute to finding meaning in life. It should be noted that in

by something physical and general in the material world, and that the attainment of some goal, such as feelings, desires, or personal judgment, is not sufficient to make it meaningful.

¹. For example, Roy Baumeister and Leonard Newman, who specialize in social psychology, consider characteristics such as purpose, justification, efficacy, and self-worth to be necessary for meaning in life. (Baumeister and Newman 1994, 681-688). Grete Thomson also discusses happiness and meaning in more detail in her book. (Thomson 2003) There are various views on this topic, and many of the major ones are listed by Metz in his entry "The Meaning of Life" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (Metz 2021)

². Exploratory research is a methodological approach that is primarily concerned with discovery and with generating or building theory. (Jupp, 110)

our belief, the themes that Messianism (in general or specific) provides can help people to strengthen (multiply), reform (restore), and even give new meaning to life.

General Messianism

Islamic Mahdism shares elements with the belief in a savior found in various other religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. Many of these shared elements restore and enhance the meaning of life, some of which we will discuss below.

Hope

Undoubtedly, belief in salvation and the coming of a savior is rooted in a sense of distress, difficulty, oppression, or some deficiency in the individual or social sphere. These things inevitably lead to despair and hopelessness for humanity, and if one does not want to follow the views of those like Schopenhauer who see this suffering as a permanent destiny for humanity and find no solution to it (Schopenhauer, 1969, vol. 1, p. 87), he must imagine a glimmer of hope in the future through which these negative things will fade away and be replaced by relief, the removal of oppression, and so on. Part of this comfort must, of course, be achieved by the human being himself or by a group of human beings; but according to historical experience and the views of the scholars of the religions mentioned, a heavenly and invisible hand is necessary to overcome the multitude of deficiencies and oppressions and to bring about peace and justice in a global arena.

This discourse has gone so far that even people like Jürgen Moltmann base the discourse of Christianity on a “theology of hope,” according to which the spirit that governs Christianity is hope, which is offered to humanity through the teachings of the Bible, based on the divine promise and plan for the end of the world and the planning of humanity’s movement toward that hopeful future in every age. (Moltmann, 1993, 11-21)

Coverage of a long-standing human aspiration; the promise of an objective example in this world and not just in the hereafter

Many religions believe in the coming of the savior in this world and not in a world beyond this world. (Tawfiqī, 2005, 266-270) In other words, while the belief in resurrection and the allocation of rewards or punishments to individuals based on their actions in this world is regarded as an indisputable principle in many religions,¹ But believing in the positive destiny of this world and its potential to reach a desirable and ideal state for humanity and other beings is a profound promise that has been emphasized in many religions. (Mowahediyān Attar & Others, 2010, 23-24) Although various religions hold differing opinions regarding the specifics of an ideal era, they generally agree that the entire universe is oriented toward goodness and happiness. This perspective stands in stark contrast to more pessimistic views that perceive the current trajectory of the world as a total decline and regression, from which there is no escape and no hopeful future can be envisioned at the end of human history.²

¹. For example, see: (Cohen, 1932, 357-364), (Tawfiqī, 2005, 274-276) and (Rasool-zadeh & Baghbani, 2010, 672-673).

². Consider, for example, Nietzsche's view on this matter: (Nietzsche, 1968, 7-8).

Its universality and generality with subjective and objective explanation

There are two main views on the meaning and purpose of life. Some consider the purpose of life to be personal and dependent on the individual; they believe that this question should be meaningful to each individual separately, and therefore the meaning of life becomes plural.¹ The dominant view, on the other hand, is that the meaning of life is a collective matter and relates to the life of all mankind, and should be conceived and considered in a general and predominant way. According to the second view, not only the view of an individual or even a specific group should be considered; rather, what makes the lives of most people purposeful becomes the criterion for measuring the meaningfulness of life, and therefore, these general meaningful elements are discussed and exchanged. (Metz, 2021)

Messianism in most religions is universal, and the effects of the Savior's coming and his positive and transforming actions encompass the entire world. (Mowahediyar Attar & Others, 2010, 22-23 and 28-29) Thus, the belief in Messianism has the potential to be considered as one of the meaningful elements of collective life (all societies are subject to the ultimate salvation) and the individual and the specific group are not deprived of its fruits. Considering the historical experience that in almost all epochs only a few groups and individuals have had a desirable life and enjoyed various material and spiritual opportunities, this promise of an ideal collective life is highly hopeful and gives a deep meaning to life and the effort for it.

In addition to the above view, some experts - such as Susan Wolf - believe that explanations of the meaning of life should not be limited to purely subjective or purely objective explanations, but should be a combination of the two; meaningful life patterns must be both subjectively satisfying and, when judged from outside perspectives, praiseworthy and valuable, having objective appeal in addition to subjective appeal. (Wolf, 1998, 630-633) It is clear that Messianism has both of the above characteristics; that is, it can both attract individual attention and provide external values and satisfactions beyond the individual.

Relief after much hardship

A common feature of most messianic religions is that, after a dark and painful period, an ideal era will dawn, leading ultimately to relief and a lasting and permanent peace. At the same time, these religions describe the final period of history - called the "end of time" or phrases such as "apocalypse" - as full of material and spiritual hardship, but promise that this era will be completely transformed and become the best era for humanity with the coming of the Savior. For example, in chapter 37 of the book of Tehillim (Psalms of David) it says:

Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.... For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land. A little while,

¹. See, for example, Viktor Frankl's view: (Frankl, 1984, 130-131).

and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found. But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.¹

We also read such descriptions in chapter 13 of the Gospel of Mark:

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come... There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains... The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.²

It is interesting to note that the Christian interpretation of this difficult time is the period of birth pains, indicating both indicates the depth of pain and suffering and the promise of a blessed event in the future. In the Islamic hadiths, the word "Faraj" is used in numerous hadiths to refer to that time,³ reminding us of this fundamental and significant change in global and human conditions. Many negative characteristics have been attributed to this dark and difficult time in the sacred texts of the religions, and it has been considered to be one of the most difficult times for humanity. This issue has gone so far that even in some Islamic narrations, when the Prophet or the infallible Imam (a.s.) describes the period before the coming of Imam Mahdi (a.s.), the audience doubts the usefulness and value of the principle of the coming of the Savior. For example, in one hadith, the narrator says:

I heard Hassan ibn Ali (a.s.) say: "This matter (the appearance of Imam Mahdi) for which you are waiting for will not come to pass until you hate each other, some of you curse each other, spit in each other's faces, and some of you even call each other infidels." I said: So is there no good in that? He said: "All good is in that. At that time, our Qa'im will arise and abolish all these wrongdoings." (al-Tusi, 1990, 437-438)

The question that comes to mind is why this common point is pointed out in different religions and the existence of such a painful period before the coming of the Savior is emphasized? Perhaps there is an important point in this: without this painful and difficult period, a person does not understand the true value and necessity for that time and does not make efforts to achieve it. In this regard, we can pay attention to the words of John Cottingham, who, referring to the importance and place of suffering in religions, describes the philosophy of justification of this matter as follows: "[This suffering] function when it does come as the key to a deepening of our nature, bringing us closer to what humans are not yet, but might one day become." In the eyes of this British philosopher, the sacred becomes apparent to us in failures. In other words, without great sufferings and temptations, this golden age will not come and its value will not be revealed. In addition to the fact that these sufferings open up a perspective for man to give up his attachments

¹. Psalm 37:1-11 (New International Version).

². Mark 13: 7-26 (New International Version).

³. For example, See: (al-Kulaynī, 1987, vol. 1, p.333); (Ibn Bābawayh, 1975, vol. 2, p. 645); (Ibn Kathīr, 1988, vol. 1, p.51).

and come closer to humanity. (Cottingham, 2003, 75) Obviously, this view and of course the effort that results from it have a great impact on accepting and moving toward belief in the Savior.

The outcome of the aforementioned discussions is that the belief in messianism across various religions not only instills great hope in the hearts of the oppressed and impoverished classes but also assures believers that such an event will occur on a global scale in this very world. Furthermore, if suffering and calamity befall humanity—whether from other humans or from environmental factors—the arrival of this promised era seems increasingly imminent. This perspective helps individuals cope with difficulties and shields them from despair and disappointment in life.

Islamic Messianism

Islamic Messianism refers to the belief in the coming of a person from the lineage of the last Prophet (peace be upon him)¹ at the end of time and the establishment of global justice at that time, which is believed by most Islamic sects.² This type of Messianism in particular has components that help to strengthen the meaning of life.

Islam's emphasis on the justice-oriented nature of Imam Mahdi (AS)

One of the characteristics of the Islamic savior or Mahdi (AS) is the justice that he will establish throughout the world after his appearance. This has been emphasized many times in the common sources of the Islamic sect.³ The form of implementing this justice has been discussed in various forms in the Islamic hadiths, especially in the Shi'ite narrations. These include the elimination of all forms of oppression and injustice, the restoration of rights to their owners (al-Irbili, 2012, vol. 4, p. 176), the spread of justice everywhere, even inside homes (al-Nu'mānī, 1977, 297), the equal distribution of public property, and the implementation of justice between the good and the evil (Ibn Bābawayh, 2011, vol. 1, p. 161). Another significant point emphasized in Islamic narrations about the reign of Imam Mahdi (a.s.) is the abundance of blessings and extensive forgiveness he will bestow upon the people. A hadith found in Sunan Ibn Majah states the following:

In my nation, the Mahdi will appear and rule for a minimum of seven or nine years. During his reign, my nation will experience unprecedented blessings; the earth will reveal its treasures and withhold nothing. Wealth will be so abundant that anyone who requests something from the Mahdi will receive it. (al-Qazwini, 1997, 5:540)

¹. The common title used by Muslims for this savior is "Mahdi."

². Many books and articles have been written on this subject. For example, the valuable book "Imam Mahdi (PBUH) among the Sunnis" (الإمام المهدي (عليه السلام) عند أهل السنة) can be mentioned, which presents in two volumes important references to the beliefs of Sunni scholars and hadith scholars on the subject of Mahdism (Faḡīh Imānī, 1982). Of course, it is clear that the degree of belief of the Twelver Shia sect in the belief in the Mahdi is the highest among all Islamic sects, and this particular view will be examined in the next section.

³. For example, we read in a hadith: Abu Saeed Khudri said: The Messenger of God (PBUH) said: "The Hour will not come until the earth is filled with injustice, oppression, and aggression. Then someone from my family will come and fill it with justice and righteousness, just as it was filled with injustice and aggression." (Hākim al-Nīsābūrī, 2014, vol. 8, p. 381)

Naturally, one of humanity's long-standing aspirations is to establish justice^١ while ensuring that everyone benefits from material blessings that elevate human life to its highest potential. This development is a primary goal for many individuals seeking the meaning of life.

God-centeredness

According to what can be seen in the verses of the Qur'an and the Hadiths related to Mahdism, the government of Imam Mahdi (AS) is a manifestation of God-centeredness at all levels of society. In other words, the system of atheistic schools, deniers, and polytheists will be dismantled, and only the monotheistic system will rule on the axis of God and His religion. This is clearly stated in verse 55 of Surah An-Nur and the following narrations. (al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1996, vol. 5, pp. 153-156) One of the key points emphasized by Muslims regarding the post-apocalyptic era is the belief that a complete and authentic divine caliphate will be established during that time, with its leader serving as the successor and representative of God. This perspective offers additional peace and motivation concerning the meaning of life, particularly for those who adhere to a supernatural and God-centered worldview. (Metz, 2021)

Human Dignity

Human dignity is an issue that has been clarified in the Holy Qur'an^٢ and has also been given great attention in the salvific perspective of Islam, to the extent that the government of Imam Mahdi (AS) has been introduced as the "Dignified State" (Al-Dawla Al-Karimah).^٣ According to the Islamic perspective, considering the excellent qualities of the leader, managers, and people in the post-emancipation era, human dignity will reach its peak; because justice will completely prevail in society and things that contradict human dignity such as discrimination, open corruption, class differences, etc. will be eliminated, and the true rule of religion and morality in society will cause any immoral behavior such as lying, greed, self-importance, and pride to give way to virtues such as humility, sacrifice, and compassion. Dignity is a valuable treasure that holds significant interest for scholars in this field, both from naturalistic and supernatural perspectives. They regard it as a foundation for mutual respect and the development of a fulfilling life. (Taylor, 2012, p. 15)

Inheritance of the Earth to the Oppressed and the Righteous

One of the fundamental and common beliefs among Muslims is that the weak and oppressed people,^٤ as well as the religious class of society (who are usually deprived of material blessings

^١. Some researchers present a significant argument regarding the meaning of life through the lens of soul-centered theory, emphasizing the importance of justice and the necessity of its implementation. For example: (Metz 2013, 124-125).

^٢. "Certainly, We have honoured the Children of Adam, and carried them over land and sea, and provided them with all the good things, and preferred them with a complete preference over many of those We have created." (Qur'an 17:70)

^٣. In Mafatih Al-Jinan (Eftetaḥ Prayer) we read: "O Allah, we ask You for a noble state through which You will honor Islam and its people, and humiliate hypocrisy and its people." (Qummi, 2015)

^٤. There are many hadiths in this regard; only one of them will be mentioned: "...with it God destroys falsehood ... and with it He removes the humiliation of slavery from your necks..." (al-Tusi, 1999, 185).

^٥. Regarding the meaning of "Istiz'aaf" (الاستضعاف), which here is synonymous with the weak and oppressed people, see: (Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, 1984, 296).

for various reasons), should benefit from worldly opportunities at all levels. This belief has a Qur'anic foundation and is one of the special divine promises that has been emphasized in several places in the Qur'an.¹ Interestingly, the Qur'an also emphasizes the mention of this divine promise in earlier holy books,² and signs of it can be seen in some books of earlier religions.³

Some Western scholars consider this issue, which is emphasized in various religions, to be an important reason for the meaning of human life and without it, human life would lose its meaning. For example, John Cottingham, who emphasizes that "goodness is clearly often defeated in the course of actual human history," writes in his book:

Now if the ultimate nature of reality contains no bias towards the good as opposed to the vicious, if there is nothing to support the hope that the good will ultimately triumph, if essentially we are on our own, with no particular reason to think that our pursuit of the good is any more than a temporary fragile disposition possessed by a percentage (perhaps a minority) of a certain class of anthropoids - then at the very least it is hard to see how we can achieve the necessary confidence and resolution to follow the path of goodness; and at worst the very idea that some lives can be more meaningful than others begins to seem a fantasy... The religious perspective - or at least a certain kind of religious perspective (more of this later) - offers the possibility of meaningfulness by providing a powerful normative framework or focus for the life of virtue. (Cottingham, 2003, 71-72)

In the Holy Qur'an, there are numerous reminders about the necessity of paying attention to goodness in thought and speech in order to benefit from life, and in a way, it is mentioned as one of the important factors in giving meaning to life. Perhaps one of the most important of these is the special emphasis placed in Surah Al-Asr on the losses and disadvantages of all people in the path of life, and it considers only those who have characteristics such as faith, righteous deeds, guidance to the truth, and patience to be safe and immune from these losses. (Mowahediyan Attar, 2022, 48-51) Interestingly, in some Islamic hadiths, this Surah is considered to be related to the era of the Islamic Savior. (Ibn Bābawayh, 1975, vol. 2, p. 656)

In conclusion, Islam emphasizes the emergence of an era for human society—particularly for the less fortunate—characterized by God-centeredness, justice, and the dignity of all individuals. This era aims to ensure that everyone can benefit from the abundant blessings of God. Each of these principles addresses specific concerns and aspirations for various groups of people.

¹ "Allah has promised those of you who have faith and do righteous deeds that He will surely make them successors in the earth, just as He made those who were before them successors, and He will surely establish for them their religion which He has approved for them, and that He will surely change their state to security after their fear, while they worship Me, not ascribing any partners to Me. Whoever is ungrateful after that—it is they who are the transgressors." (Qur'an 24:55).

² "Certainly, We wrote in the Psalms, after the Torah: 'Indeed My righteous servants shall inherit the earth.'" (Qur'an 21:105).

³ For example, in chapter 37 of the Book of Tehillim (Psalms of David), it is stated: "Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land."

The Shia's Special View of the Savior

Among Muslims, Shi'ites have a deeper and more serious belief in the coming of the Islamic Savior. The importance and attention of the Shia religion to Mahdism has been recognized by many researchers, to the extent that some have considered the belief in Mahdism as the heart of the Shia belief system. (Filiu, 2012, p.XI; Reynolds, 2001, pp.84-86) It seems that the elements that exist in the Shia belief about Imam Mahdi (AS) and his government contribute significantly to strengthening the meaning of life, some of which we will discuss.

The Personality and Unique Characteristics of the Shiite Savior

One of the characteristics of the Shi'ite beliefs is the necessity of the existence of a living Imam at all times, and that the earth is never devoid of God's proof, and as long as man is present on the earth, the divine proof and representative must also be on the earth. (Ibn Bābawayh, 1992, 161-163)¹ Also, the Shi'ite religion proves certain characteristics for the Imam, among the most prominent of which are the infallibility and knowledge of the Imam. (al-Hilli, 2004, 184-185; Rabbānī Gulpayigānī, 2012, 176-190 and 213-222) Accepting and establishing the belief in the presence and life of an Imam who has both knowledge and infallibility has an undeniable impact on the individual and social approach of the Shi'ite community; because in the eyes of every Shi'ite, the Twelfth Imam is present with him during this period of occultation; he watches over his actions, needs, and problems and helps the Shi'ite community in various ways when necessary. The sense of companionship and the presence of divine leadership, characterized by these qualities, enhances hope and alleviates despair and loneliness for every believer. However, Shiites hold that the current proof and caliph of God is the twelfth Imam, who is in occultation due to specific circumstances and cannot be accessed directly. One might argue that the Imam's absence contradicts this belief and diminishes hope in the lives of believers. To address this concern, an explanation of faith in the unseen is essential.

Belief in the Unseen (الغيب) is one of the foundations of belief in various religions and is considered to be the main point of division between God-centered and atheistic religions. There are many examples of the Unseen and it encompasses everything that does not fall within the realm of tangible things.² (Makārim Shīrāzī, 1995, vol. 1, pp. 70-72) Although the promise of the coming of the promised savior or an ideal era in the future of humanity (which, as mentioned earlier, is common among different religions) can be considered a kind of example of the Unseen, because according to the Shi'ite belief, Imam Mahdi (AS) is currently living in a hidden state and in occultation, and because of the special kind of life he has in this era, he is considered a more special example of the unseen.³ The profound impact of belief in unseen matters and assistance—whose

¹. Of course, according to Shi'ite belief, this Imam can be visible or hidden; Imam Baqir (PBUH): "The earth will not remain without an Imam, whether visible or hidden." (Ibn Bābawayh, 1992, p.162)

². It is important to understand that belief in the unseen in Islam does not equate to accepting superstitions without evidence or proof. Instead, the "unseen" refers to hidden truths and realities whose existence is validated through reasons that extend beyond ordinary sensory perception (Motahari, 2006, pp. 642-643).

³. There are several hadiths on this subject in the narrations following verses 2 and 3 of Al-Baqarah. See for example: (al-'Arusi al-Huwayzi, 1992, vol. 1, pp.31-32).

existence has been substantiated by evidence—on instilling hope in human life and preventing nihilism and despair is both clear and significant.¹

Waiting for Imam Mahdi among Shiites: Idealism and Constructive Activity

One of the points emphasized by the Imams, which was pointed out to the Shi'ites in various ways throughout the difficult early Islamic history, was the promise of relief and the giving of hope for a bright future.² In view of the severe pressures that were exerted on the Shi'ites in various Islamic periods, and these hardships often led to the killing, expulsion, and imprisonment of the Imams and their followers, the Shi'ites continued their lives with only a glimmer of hope for this ideal era, and under the guidance of the Imams they tried to rebuild their facilities and abilities in order to reach this era. Therefore, some hadiths clearly refer to the educational role of hope and ideal-making in the life and growth of the Shi'ite community.³

One might think that this hope was false; because it created a desire in the hearts of the Shi'ites that will not be realized in the near future, but in the distant future. In response to this, it must be said, first of all, that the Imams themselves have repeatedly warned the Shi'ites that the final liberation and general emancipation have difficulties and conditions without which they cannot be realized. That is why they forbade hast, haste, and timing. (al-Kulaynī, 1987, vol. 1, p. 368). Second, in the Imams' pedagogical view, emancipation is not a single event, but a continuous process, and whoever takes a step in this process will enjoy divine emancipation and relief.⁴ Thirdly, the way of compensation or, in a better sense, the rewards that are mentioned according to the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) for those who strive on this long path, will remove the concerns of not understanding the general end.⁵

"Waiting" or "Intizar" (الانتظار) is a fundamental doctrine in the Shi'ite belief system that has been specially recommended by religious leaders to the extent that it has been considered the best of deeds and the most important duty of Shi'ites, especially during the occultation. (Ibn Bābawayh, 1975, vol. 2, p. 644) If waiting is correctly and actively interpreted and understood, its tremendous impact on the dynamism and vitality of the community of believers is obvious and certain; for it places the waiting person in a state of serious anticipation and companionship and empathy with the ideals of the Savior.⁶ Moreover, it has been emphasized in the hadiths that if one moves correctly on the path of waiting, the advancement or delay of the Savior's appearance will not harm

¹. See The article: "The Role of Belief in the Unseen in Giving Hope to Life": (Ramezani Staremi, 2017, 19-24).

². In this regard, it is sufficient to refer to the keyword "the Wait for the Relief" (Intizār al-Faraj) in Shi'ite sources and to examine the numerous cases in which Shi'ite leaders adopted this approach.

³. Ali bin Yaqtin said Imam Kazim (PBUH) said to me: "The Shi'ites have been raised with hopes for two hundred years." (al-Kulaynī, 1987, vol. 1, p. 369).

⁴. This matter is reflected in various hadiths, including: "Waiting for relief is one of the greatest reliefs" (Ibn Bābawayh, 1975, vol. 1, p. 320) and "Whoever knew this matter was relieved of it because he waited for it" (al-Kulaynī, 1987, vol. 1, p. 371).

⁵. Among them is the reward of being with the Prophet (s.a.w.) at the beginning of Islam or being with Imam Mahdi in the final battle against evil, and even having the status of martyrs of that era. (Ibid., 371)

⁶. Perhaps N. T. Wright, a prominent Christian scholar and theologian, shares a perspective that aligns with the Shiite view. In one of his books, he explicitly critiques the notion of purely individualistic practices, or private piety, among Christians. He argues that engagement in social, cultural, and political spheres, as well as the pursuit of justice and beauty in the world, is essential for Christians to fulfill God's mission (Wright 2008, 282).

the waiting person (al-Kulaynī, 1987, vol. 1, p. 371), because even at that time he is practically with the Savior and in step with his ideals. Such a view prevents disappointment and a sense of loss in those who wait.

An important point that is of great importance for the productivity and special effect of waiting on the meaningfulness of life is its correct explanation, and this issue is necessary to the extent that if it is not done correctly, this dynamic and life-giving idea will become a deadly weapon and a narcotic drug for the individual and society. The emphasis of the Shi'ite hadiths on the practical or jihadi aspect of waiting (Ibn Shu'ba al-Harrānī, 1984, 37) or the admonition to avoid idleness and laziness on the way to the help of the Savior (al-Tusi, 1990, vol. 1, pp. 410-411) is in this direction and portrays an active movement towards lofty goals while waiting for the coming of the Savior. This view practically requires a specific lifestyle, which some researchers call the Mahdist lifestyle or the lifestyle of waiting. This type of view of life and its pursuit is consistent with the views of scholars such as John Cottingham, who believe that life can be made meaningful with a certain type of religious perspective. (Cottingham, 2003, 72)

Another characteristic of the Shiite perspective on this matter is the role of humans in the emergence of the Savior. According to many Shi'ite scholars, the performance of the believers and the waiting ones is effective in preparing and advancing or delaying the appearance of the Savior. Although there are differences among scholars in the method and extent of this effectiveness, its principle cannot be denied in view of the narrative and intellectual evidence. Such a view leads to a purposeful effort to prepare the conditions for the appearance of the Savior, which is the key to the believing community, which is manifested in individual (such as the growth of faith and inner piety) and social (such as compassion for people or confronting oppression). This approach itself provides a profound meaning for life and is particularly applicable to the view that the meaning of life is constructed by humans themselves (rather than discovered by them).¹

The Distinct Characteristics of the Post-Emergence Era among Shiites

Some specific components of the era following the advent of the Savior, which are emphasized in Shiism, address many of the challenges and concerns faced by contemporary society. For instance, although the pursuit of scientific knowledge has progressed rapidly in the modern and postmodern eras, its disconnection from spiritual and moral values, as well as transcendent rationality, has raised concerns among numerous experts and individuals who are apprehensive about the future of humanity.² The promise concerning the intellectual and moral excellence of humanity, along with the potential for significant scientific advancement following the emergence of Imam Mahdi

¹. For example, the American philosopher Irving Singer has the following opinion in his book: "We speak of "finding" a life that is meaningful, but the meaning is something we create." (Singer, 2010, 41-43)

². As just one example, the words of the renowned British philosopher Bertrand Russell can be cited: "I am compelled to fear that science will be used to promote the power of dominant groups, rather than to make men happy" (Russell 1924, 5).

(AS)¹, is both hopeful and encouraging. Striving toward that ideal era fosters a profound sense of purpose.

One of the ancient beliefs, and to some extent specific to the Shi'ism, is "Raj'a" or the belief in the return of some good or bad people in the final period of this world. (al-Mufid, 1983, 48) There are several reasons for this belief, including the reward of the righteous and the punishment of certain criminals in this world, or the strengthening of the hope and readiness of those waiting for the appearance of the Savior. (Muhammadi Rayshahri, 2014, Vol. 1, pp. 49-51) Both of the above cases are deeply influential in making the lives of believers meaningful; because by believing in Raj'a, they are sure that people who have been at the highest point of faith or at the lowest levels of humanity throughout history and have apparently not received the reward or punishment for their actions will return to the world again, and in this way, some of the efforts and good deeds of pure believers or the disbelief, evil and oppression of pure disbelievers and oppressors will be compensated in this world. In addition, some of the waiting ones (Muntazirs) who wish to be present and live in the ideal era of the Savior may succeed in becoming among the returnees by reaching high levels of faith.

Conclusion

The issue of the meaning of life is a very important and vital concern, especially in the current era and various experts have spoken about different aspects such as its concept, ways of measuring the meaningfulness of life, factors effective in strengthening it, and its ideological and psychological effects. To address the challenges posed by the lack of meaning in contemporary life, the Islamic belief in Mahdism, particularly from a Shiite perspective, can be profoundly beneficial. Beyond the hope and openness that the promise of the Savior's arrival generally provides, Islamic Mahdism also assures justice and human dignity alongside the coming of the Savior. These two elements are crucial for humanity, especially in the modern era, where they are often lacking. Furthermore, the belief in divine leadership and the concept of constructive waiting in Shiite Mahdism can transform the aimlessness, futility, and emptiness experienced by contemporary individuals into a sense of dynamism and idealism.

Other researchers' efforts to address the emerging needs of contemporary society through the lens of Islamic Mahdism, as well as comparative studies of Islamic and Shiite perspectives on the future of humanity in relation to later philosophical schools such as existentialism, can provide valuable insights for the scientific community on this topic.

¹. In one version of the hadith, Imam Sadiq (PBUH) said: "When our Qa'im rises, Allah will lay His hand on the heads of the servants, and with it He will gather their minds and complete their dreams." (al-Kulayni, 1987, vol. 1, p. 25). Qutb Rawandi reported the end of the hadith as follows: "...and with it He will perfect their morals." (al-Rawandi 1989, vol. 2, p. 840). Regarding the expression "the Imam lays his hands on the heads of the people" and its meaning, Shi'ite scholars have given many possibilities, for a comparison of these opinions see: (Darikvand & Ja'fari, 2015, 49-66).

It should be mentioned the details of this growth are not much discussed in the hadiths, but with expressions such as "comprehension" (جَمْع) or "perfection" (كَمَل), we can understand that this perfection and excellence will be maximum. According to some other hadiths, science will also undergo an extraordinary leap in the post-emergence era that is in no way comparable to what it was before. (al-Rawandi, 1989, vol. 2, p. 841).

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