

MESSIANISM AND ISLAM

Riffat Hassan

PRECIS

While messianism occupies a place of central importance in the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, it appears to be outside the mainstream of the Islamic religious tradition, though Shi'a Muslims regard it as an essential part of Islam. The author here (1) discusses the components of messianism, such as the concepts of the Messiah, redemption, intercession, and the charismatic personality or community, in light of qur'anic teachings about human responsibility, destiny, and salvation; (2) gives an account of messianism which developed in Shi'a Islam, and describes the theory of the imamate and the concept of the "Mahdi"; (3) offers personal reflections on the psychological significance of the fact that, though messianism appears to be incompatible with the qur'anic message, it is a widespread phenomenon throughout the Islamic world, playing a crucial role not only in the lives of Muslims in general—particularly the disadvantaged, such as women—but also involving government power structures in Muslim countries; and (4) concludes by reflecting briefly on the relevance of the subject and its discussion to interreligious dialogue among contemporary Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Introduction

Messianism may be described as an ideology consisting of a complex of ideas, doctrines, attitudes, and expectations which at a particular historic moment, because of a specific constellation of facts, has the potentiality to become actualized in a messianic movement with a markedly eschatological or a utopian-revolutionary character and message. Messianism, which tends to develop in conditions of frustration, stress, and suffering, includes both a negative evaluation of the present as well as a hope and an expectancy that the time process will bring about a major change for the better, leading either to the restoration

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of a past golden age or to the creation of a new one. Although messianism both as ideology and as movement is not necessarily centered upon a messianic figure, in general messianic movements are initiated by a charismatic personality.¹

Though messianism occupies a place of central importance in the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Islam is not a messianic religion and has no room for a savior-messiah."² Most of the Sunni Muslims (who comprise about seventy to seventy-five percent of the one billion Muslims in the world) would endorse this statement, while the Shi'a Muslims (who comprise most of the remaining twenty-five to thirty percent of Muslim people) would argue that messianism is an essential part of Islam. This divergence between the viewpoints of the Sunni and Shi'a Muslims is not surprising in view of the fact that there are differences of opinion even within each group. While most Muslims accept the idea that all aspects of life are to be governed by the Shari'ah (code of life), which is largely derived from the Qur'an (Book of Revelation), and the sayings and practice of Muhammad (Hadith and Sunnah) and recognize the importance of *ijma* (consensus of the community), *qiyas* (analogical reasoning), and *ijtihad* (individual reasoning) in the lawmaking process, the various schools of Sunni and Shi'a Islam differ in the way in which they use the materials and methods involved in the formulation of Islamic law. It should also be stated that all "sources" of Islam do not form a coherent, homogeneous body of knowledge. For instance, inconsistencies and contradictions exist not only within Hadith literature but also between it and the Qur'an.

Since different Muslims have different ideas about what constitutes "Islam," I need to clarify my own position at the outset. For me, normative Islam is defined by the Qur'an, whose centrality to the Islamic worldview is undisputed. Furthermore, the Muslim belief that the Qur'an is the Word of God—conveyed to Muhammad through the agency of the Angel Gabriel and transmitted by him without change or error to the first Muslims—gives the Qur'an, at least in theory, a degree of authority not possessed by any other "source" of Islam.

I will deal with the subject of messianism and Islam in the following sequence: (1) by discussing the various components of messianism (e.g., the concepts of the Messiah, redemption, intercession, the charismatic personality or community) in light of qur'anic teachings about human responsibility, destiny, and salvation; (2) by giving an account of the messianism which developed in Shi'a Islam, describing the theory of the imamate and the concept of the "Mahdi" who will reappear before the end of time; and (3) by offering some personal reflections on the psychological significance of the fact that, though messianism appears to be incompatible with qur'anic teachings, nonetheless, in the Muslim world it is a widespread phenomenon, playing a pivotal role in the lives of many present-day Muslims from all segments of society.

¹"Messiah and Messianic Movements" in the *New Encyclopedia Britannica* (Macropaedia, vol. 2) (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1976), p. 1077.

²Ibid.

I. Messianism and the Teachings of the Qur'an

Though Islam shares many of the beliefs and characteristics of the two Semitic/Abrahamic/monotheistic religions which preceded it, the idea of messianism which is of central importance in Judaism and Christianity is alien to Islam as represented in and by the Qur'an. In fact, the Qur'an repudiates the main components of the idea of messianism, namely, the concept of the Messiah as well as the notions of redemption, intercession, and a charismatic personality or community having more than human powers or "special" prerogatives.

Though the Messiah is represented quite differently by the Jewish and Christian traditions, in both traditions there has been a strong emphasis on the attitude of expecting, and waiting for, the Messiah to appear (Judaism) or to return (Christianity). While in Judaism stress falls more on the historical than on the eschatological role of the Messiah, and in Christianity the opposite is the case, in both traditions the eyes of the devout are focused upon an event in the future, an event believed to be inextricably linked with their salvation in this world and the next. The here-and-now, even though it may be significant as a time of preparation for the Messiah or messianic age, is of value only derivatively. But the Qur'an does not relativize any part of history. Since it does not teach the devout to wait for the Messiah or messianic age, it frees them from the burden of living for the future. While stating with emphasis that the life-to-come is of far greater importance than the life of the present, the Qur'an makes it clear that it is what human beings do here and now which determines their ultimate destiny.

Although the Messiah figure of neither Judaism nor Christianity appears in the Qur'an, it is of interest to note that the word "Masih" is used in the Qur'an both with the word "Isa" (e.g., Al-'Imrān 3:45; An-Nisā' 4:157, 171) and alone (e.g., Al-Mā'idah 5:19, 75, 78; Al-Taubah 9:30-31) to refer to Jesus. The primary meaning of the root-word "*m-s-h*," from which "Masih" is derived, is "to cleanse a polluted object by wiping it with one's hands."³ In view of Jesus' reputation for healing people by touching them, it is not difficult to see that "Masih" would appear to be an appropriate title for him. Like the Jewish "Mashiah" and the Christian "Messiah" or "Christ," the qur'anic "Masih" also refers to one who has been anointed, as ancient kings and priests were. There is a further sense in which the term "al-Masih" is used in Arabic: to refer to one who travels a lot. (The root-word in this instance is not "*m-s-h*" but "*s-y-h*."⁴) Jesus was known both as one anointed and as one who walked much, so "Masih" would appear to be a title suited to him for more than one reason. However, the word "Masih" is used in the Qur'an as if it were a proper name, and no explanation is given for its usage.

In the opinion of some commentators on the Qur'an (e.g., Ibn Abbas,

³E. W. Lane, *Arabic English Lexicon*, vol. 7 (London: William and Norgate, 1863), p. 2713.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 2714.

Mujahid, Zahhak, and Saddi⁵), the personal pronoun “*hu*” in *Az-Zukhruf* 43:61 refers to Jesus as a sign for the coming of the “Hour” (which is generally interpreted as the Last Day), while some others (e.g., Al-Hasan, Qatada, and Sa’id bin Jubair⁶) think that it refers to the Qur’an, and Allama Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ahmad (known as Imam-Qurtabi) thinks that it refers to Muhammad.⁷ In any case, whether or not *Az-Zukhruf* 43:61 refers to the second coming of Jesus at the end of time, the Qur’an assigns no redemptive or intercessive functions to him, nor does it show him as the judge of the living and the dead, as in Christian belief. Rather, on the Day of Judgment, he is shown defending himself very staunchly against the charge that he claimed divinity for himself or his mother (*Al-Mā’idah* 5:116-117).

The concept of “redemption” plays a central role in both Jewish and Christian messianism, although the two religious traditions understand “redemption” in widely differing ways, as pointed out by Gershom Scholem:

Judaism, in all its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance. In contrast, Christianity conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual, and which effects an inner transformation which need not correspond to anything outside.⁸

Islam, the historical heir to the Judaeo-Christian religious complex, repudiates the concept of redemption, be it public or private, of a community or of an individual, in history or beyond history.

The rejection by Islam of the idea of redemption, according to which one individual can bear the sins and burdens of another, is inherent in the qur’anic view about the creation of human beings and their ultimate destiny. Adam (as representative of the human species), though of humble origin, being made of baked clay (*Al-An’ām* 6:2, *Al-Ā’rāf* 7:12; *Al-Ĥijr* 15:26, 28, 33), is yet a special creation in that God “breathed My own spirit into him” (*Al-Ĥijr* 15:29; *As-Sajdah* 32:9; *Ṣād* 38:72). Adam has both a capacity for creative knowledge which other creatures lack (*Al-Baqarah* 2:30 ff.) and freedom of will. Also, of all creation, Adam alone dares to accept the “trust” (of moral autonomy) offered by God:

We did indeed offer the trust to the heavens and the earth and the

⁵Abu Abdullah Al-Qurtabi, *Al-Ja’meh lil ahkam al-Qur’an*, reprinted, vol. 16 (Cairo, 1982), p. 105.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 107.

⁸Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 1.

mountains and they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it. "Insān" [human being] undertook it. Surely "insān" is very "zālim"⁹ [transgressing the proper limits set by Allah] and "jāhil" (intemperate and ignorant). (Al-Aḥzab 33:72)

This verse brings out with sharp clarity both the splendor of human daring reflected in the willingness to accept a "trust" refused by all others and the tragedy of the human failure, due to inner weakness, to live up to the responsibility undertaken so boldly.

While the Qur'an recognizes the reality and intensity of the struggle between good and evil, both within human beings and in the world, it

declares the preservation, intensification of the sense of human personality to be the ultimate ground of all ethical activity. Man is a free responsible being, he is the maker of his own destiny, his salvation is his own business. There is no mediator between God and man. God is the birthright of every man. The Qur'an therefore, while it looks upon Jesus Christ as the spirit of God, strongly protests against the Christian doctrine of Redemption, as well as the doctrine of an infallible visible head of the Church—doctrines which proceed upon the assumption of the insufficiency of human personality and tend to create in man a sense of dependence, which is regarded by Islam as a force obstructing the ethical progress of man.¹⁰

One of the clearest, most insistent themes of the Qur'an is that all human beings are responsible and accountable for their choices or actions in life. For instance:

. . . what every "nafs" [soul] has earned, it brings upon none but itself and no burden-bearer bears another's burden. (Al-An'ām (6:165)

Every "nafs" is held in pledge for what it earns. (Al-Muddaththir 74:38)

Because human beings have unique capabilities, they are charged with the struggle to live justly or righteously. "In this struggle, God is with man, provided man makes the necessary effort,"¹¹ but, as Alessandro Bausani correctly observes, "there is nothing further from the Qur'an than the feeling of a pre-determined universe."¹² Verses such as "Surely Allah does not change the condition of a

⁹The primary meaning of the root "z-l-m" is "to put in a wrong place." Toshihiko Izutsu points out: "Briefly and generally speaking, *zulm* is to do injustice in the sense of going beyond one's bounds and doing what one has no right to," to oneself or another (*The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran* [Tokyo: Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1959], pp. 152-153).

¹⁰Muhammad Iqbal, *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, ed. S. A. Vahid (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1964), p. 38.

¹¹Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), p. 18.

¹²Alessandro Bausani, "The Concept of Time in the Religious Philosophy of Muhammad

people until they change what is in their own 'nafs'" (Ar-Ra'd 13:11) clearly put the responsibility for choice of destiny upon human beings rather than God.

Intertwined with the concept of "redemption" in messianism is the concept of "intercession" (*Shafa'a*). Not only does the Qur'an reject redemption or "saviorship," but it equally rejects intercession. For instance:

. . . be on your guard against a day when no "nafs" shall be of any avail to another; when no intercession will be accepted from any "nafs"; when no intercession will be of profit to my "nafs"; and when none will be helped. (Al-Baqarah 2:123)

As Fazlur Rahman has pointed out:

The whole temper of the Qur'an is against intercession, for, to begin with, "God does not require from any person what is beyond his [or her] power" (Sura 2:223, 286; Sura 6:152; Sura 7:42; Sura 23:62); secondly . . . God's "mercy comprehends everything" (Sura 7:156; Sura 40:7).¹³

At the heart of messianism lies the notion of a charismatic personality with larger-than-life qualities even when the Messiah is not believed to be divine, as in Christianity. The idea of any person's being or becoming anything more than human or God "is simply anathema to the Qur'an,"¹⁴ which refers to the fact that all prophets, including Muhammad, were human beings who ate, walked, lived, and died like other human beings (see, e.g., Al-Baqarah 2:87, 91; Al-Imran 3:20, 111, 143, 180, 182; An-Nisā' 4:155; Yūsuf 12:109; Ar-Ra'd 13:38; Ibrāhīm 14:11, An-Naḥl 16:43; Banī Isrā'īl 17:93; Al-Kahf 18:110; Al-Anbiyā 21:7; Al-Furqān 25:20; Ḥā-Mīm 41:6). The Qur'an does not depict Muhammad as possessing any superhuman or divine attributes. In fact, it instructs him repeatedly to affirm that he is not an angel and that he has no treasures and no knowledge of the future (e.g., see Al-An'ām 6:50; Al-Ā'rāf 7:188; Ḥūd 11:12, 49; Al-Mulk 67:25-26; Al-Jinn 72:25).

Though Muhammad is described as a man of "lofty moral character" (Al-Qalam 68:4) and a model for humankind, he always remains struggling and suffering like other prophets. The Qur'an, recognizing his humanity, addresses his human condition in various ways. For instance, it comforts him when he feels dejected due to his adversaries' antagonism toward him and his message (e.g., see Al-Mā'idah 5:41; Al-An'ām 6:33, 34; Yūnus 10:65; Al-Ḥijr 15:97, 98; An-Naḥl 16:127; Ṭā-Ḥā 20:130; Al-Furqān 25:7; An-Naml 27:70; Ar-Rūm 30:60; Yā-Sīn 36:76; Ṣād 38:17; *Ash-Shūrā* 42:15; Al-Aḥqāf 46:35; Qāf 50:39; Al-Qalam 68:48; Al-Ma'ārij 70:5; Al-Muzzammil 73:10; Ad-Dahr 76:24; *Ash-Sharḥ* 94:7-8); it reprimands him when he ignores ibn Umm Maktum, a blind convert

Iqbal," *Die Welt des Islams*, N.S. vol. 3 (1954), p. 172.

¹³Rahman, *Major Themes*, p. 31.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 89.

who interrupts his conversation with al-Walid ibn al-Mughira, an influential Meccan ('Abasa 80:1-15), and even says that, if God willed, "We could certainly take away that which We have revealed to thee . . ." (Bani Isrā'īl 17:86).

Although the Qur'an describes Muhammad as a Messenger to all humankind (e.g., see An-Nisā' 4:79, 170; Al-Ā'rāf 7:158; Al-Ḥajj 22:49; Sabā' 34:28) and the "Seal of the Prophets" (Al-Aḥzāb 33:40), his task as *bashir* (bringer of good tidings) and *nazir* (warner of the consequences of wrongdoing) is to convey God's message and show the "straight path," not to compel anyone to follow it (e.g., see Al-Baqarah (2:272; Al-Imrān 3:19; Al-Mā'idah 5:99; An-Naml 27:92). Muhammad is responsible only for himself (An-Nisā' 4:84) and is not able to guide to salvation even those whom he loves (Al-Qaṣaṣ 28:56). He is also told by the Qur'an that it is not a part of his function to watch over the deeds of others (e.g., see An-Nisā' 4:80; Al An'ām 6:66, 108; Ash-Shūrā 42:6; Al-Ghāshiyah 88:22) or to ask anyone to follow him rather than God (Al-Imrān 3:78). The Qur'an makes it clear to Muhammad that if he himself were to disobey God he would not escape punishment (e.g., see Al-An'ām 6:15; Ḥūd 11:113; Bani Isrā'īl 17:39, 74, 75; Ash-Shu arā 26:213; Az-Zumar 39:13).

Like the concept of the "charismatic personality," the concept of the "charismatic community" plays a predominant role in Judaeo-Christian messianism. In a description of the nature of the "charismatic community," W. Montgomery Watt wrote that "one of the signs that the community is charismatic is that membership of it implies salvation or entry to Paradise."¹⁵ In this sense, the Muslim community is not regarded as "charismatic" by the Qur'an. The very first statement of the Qur'an makes this clear, for in it God is described as "Rabb-al-'ālamīn": Sustainer of all peoples and universes. Not only does God create all, but God also sends guidance to all, as pointed out by Fāṭir 35:24: "There is not an ummah wherein a warner has not come." The Qur'an strongly rejects the claims of any community to have been chosen exclusively for the favor or guidance of God. For instance:

And they say: none shall enter paradise except a Jew or Christians.
These are their vain desires . . . (Al-Baqarah 2:111)

And the Jews and Christians say, "We are the sons of Allah and Allah's loved ones." Say: "Why then does Allah chastise you for your sins?" No, you are human beings from amongst those whom Allah created . . . (Al-Mā'idah 5:18)

Not only is the idea of exclusivism negated by the Qur'an, but the opposite is clearly affirmed. For instance:

Surely those who believe and those who are Jews, and Christians and Sabians (and) whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does

¹⁵W. Montgomery Watt, "The Conception of the Charismatic Community in Islam," *Numen*, vol. 7 (1960), p. 82.

good deeds—for them the reward is with their Rabb. They shall not experience any fear or grief. (Al-Baqarah 2:62)

Surely, whoever submits to Allah and is the doer of good, his [or her] reward is with his [or her] Rabb. Such persons shall not experience fear or grief. (Al-Baqarah 2:112)

The Qur'an sees the Muslim community "as a community among communities," each community being judged by God according to its own Law:

. . . For all of you We made a Law and way and if Allah wanted, Allah could have made you a single ummah (but Allah did not do so in order that) Allah might test you in what Allah had given to you . . . (Al-Mā'idah 5:48)

Though hailed as the community maintaining a just balance between extremes (Al-Baqarah 2:143) and a model of good for humankind (Al-'Imrān 3:110), the Muslim community

. . . is given no assurance whatever that it will be automatically God's darling unless, when it gets power on the earth, it establishes prayer, provides welfare for the poor, commands good, and prohibits evil (Sura 22:41, etc.). In Sura 17:38, the Muslims are warned that "If you turn your backs (upon this teaching), God will substitute another people for you who will not be like you."¹⁶

Here it is of interest to cite Al-Baqarah 2:124, wherein Abraham is told that Allah's promise of favor to him is not the birthright of his progeny:

And when his Rabb tested Abraham with certain imperatives and he carried them out, Allah said: "Surely I will make you an Imam for humanity;" Abraham asked: "And what about my progeny?" Allah said: "My promise does not extend to the *zālimīn*."

II. Messianism and Shi'a Islam

The foregoing examination of the idea of messianism in light of qur'anic teachings leads to the conclusion that normative Islam as embodied in the Qur'an does not support the idea of messianism in any of its forms, in part or in toto, as it applies to either an individual or a community. While the above is the normative Islamic position vis-à-vis messianism, messianism is an essential part of religious belief and practice for almost all Shi'a Muslims. Is Shi'a messianism then un-Islamic? If Shi'a messianism is un-Islamic, this puts Shi'a Islam itself in jeopardy since messianism is the core around which it is built. Given the clarity of the qur'anic teachings vis-à-vis the various components of messianism, Shi'a messianism does not fit theologically or logically into the framework of normative Islam.

¹⁶Rahman, *Major Themes*, p. 167.

However, both historically and psychologically Shi'a Islam in general—and Shi'a messianism in particular—have become a continuing and powerful force within the world of Islam.

As observed by Kenneth Cragg, the Shi'as who constitute the most important schism in Islam are a "topic of much complexity for the historian,"¹⁷ and the numerous influences (including the Gnostic, Neo-Platonic, Manichaeic, and Christian) which could have penetrated Islam during its early history and contributed to its emergence are still to be disentangled.¹⁸ However, it is clear that from the beginning of the Shi'a-Sunni split religious as well as political and cultural factors were involved, although there is much debate among scholars on the relative importance of these factors. A brief account of the emergence of Shi'a Islam follows, focusing on those themes and ideas which are central to Shi'a messianism.

The term "Shi'a"—literally, a faction or supporting group—at first meant only a group which held that, prior to his death in 632 A.D., Muhammad had nominated 'Ali, his nearest-of-kin male relative and husband of his only surviving daughter Fatima, to succeed him as the leader of the Muslim ummah. They, therefore, disputed the right of Abu Bakr, who was chosen through *ijma* (consensus of the community) as the first khalifa (caliph), refusing

to concede that the "ijma" has any authority to confer on any person the right to govern a Muslim state. They maintained that all times a living descendant of 'Ali, whether concealed ("matur") or unconcealed, demands and receives allegiance from the Muslims and is in point of fact the only rightful Caliph (temporal ruler) and Imam (religious leader) of the Islamic peoples.¹⁹

But, though the Shi'as proclaimed the imamate of 'Ali, during the caliphate of Abu Bakr and 'Umar (A.D. 632-644), which was ". . . characterised by a constant succession of victories of the Muslim army . . . there does not seem to be any debate on who should be responsible to lead the community toward salvation after the Prophet's death."²⁰ Unrest became visible during the caliphate of 'Uthman (A.D. 644-656), of the clan of Banu Umayyad (Umayyads), an old rival to the clan of Banu Hashim (Hashimites), to which both Muhammad and 'Ali belonged. 'Uthman was charged, among other things, with favoring the Meccans over the *mawali* (clients of the subject-races) and appointing his own relatives to high public offices.²¹ 'Uthman's murder by tribesmen from the garrisons

¹⁷Kenneth Cragg, *The House of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Encino and Belmont, CA: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1975), p. 79.

¹⁸"Shi'a" in H. A. R. Gibb and F. H. Kramers, eds., *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953), p. 537.

¹⁹Syed 'Abid Ali 'Abid, "Political Theory of the Shi'ites," in M. M. Sharif, ed., *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1963), p. 732.

²⁰Abdulaziz A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), pp. 1-2.

²¹'Abid, "Political Theory of the Shi'ites," pp. 732-733.

sons of Iraq and Egypt led to further conflict. Accusing 'Ali (who had been elected as the next caliph) of complicity in 'Uthman's assassination, 'A'isha (Muhammad's wife and Abu Bakr's daughter) and some leading Meccans went to Iraq to raise an army against him. 'Ali also went to Iraq to rally his supporters against his opponents; the resulting Battle of the Camel was fought on December 6, 656. Although 'Ali was victorious in the battle, "the real unity of the ummah had been broken, never to be re-established. Henceforth, no caliph would be able to rule without an army."²² Since military power, along with economic power, had moved to the provinces, 'Ali moved his capital to the garrison town of Kufa where he had many partisans.

'Ali's next challenger was Mu'awiya, 'Uthman's cousin and governor of Syria. Though the latter had the best army in the empire and the support of many Meccan traders, administrators, and generals,²³ 'Ali's followers were at the point of victory in the Battle of Siffin (A.D. 657) when Mu'awiya's Syrian troops fastened the leaves of the Qur'an to their lances to show that they appealed to the Book of God for a judgment. This stratagem made the majority of 'Ali's followers favor accepting the arbitration proposed by Mu'awiya. However, one group (later known as the "Khawarij" or Seceders) accused 'Ali of violating the qur'anic injunction that those who rebel without just cause must be fought (Al-Hujurat 49:9) and launched a series of terrorist actions against him, forcing him to fight them. In A.D. 661, he was assassinated by a Khariji named 'Abd al-Muljam al-Sarimi.²⁴

After 'Ali's assassination, the Shi'a in Kufa demanded that the caliphate be restored to his House. The motives leading to "this legitimist claim . . . [which] is the beginning of the Shi'a political doctrine"²⁵ are certainly complex. Among the factors which played an important role in the rise of Shi'a Islam, the following socio-political factors are generally identified by scholars: the traditional enmity between certain southern and northern tribes; the rivalry between the Umayyads and the Hashimites and the discontentment of the Persian *mawali* who felt that they had been discriminated against by the Umayyads; and the vested interests of the Kufans, who had gained much importance in the political, economic, and intellectual spheres during the caliphate of 'Ali. However, the Kufans' ". . . support for the leadership of the 'Alids, at least in the beginning, did not imply any religious underpinning."²⁶ During 'Ali's caliphate, the Kufans had looked to the family of 'Ali primarily as a symbol of their independence, but ". . . there early came in several factors to give this sentiment an emotional and moral, and therefore, a religious turn."²⁷

²²"History of Islam," in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (Macropaedia, vol. 9), p. 929.

²³Ibid.

²⁴"Ali," in Gibb and Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopedia*, p. 31.

²⁵Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1968), p. 208.

²⁶Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, p. 6.

²⁷Marshall G. S. Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?" *American Oriental Society Journal*, vol. 75, no. 9 (1955), p. 3.

Among the historical events which had a significant emotional impact on those supporting the idea that the 'Alids alone were legitimate leaders of the Muslim ummah were undoubtedly the difficulties encountered by 'Ali during his caliphate; the abdication of 'Ali's elder son Hasan in favor of Mu'awiya, after an unsuccessful attempt to resist him (A.D. 661); and the martyrdom of the Kufan hero Hujr b. al-Kindi, who led an abortive revolt against Mu'awiya a decade later.

However, it was the tragedy of Karbala in A.D. 680 which gave Shi'a Islam its most powerful passion motif and made its cause predominantly religious and moral. The tragedy occurred when Husain, 'Ali's younger son and the third imam of the Shi'as, responded to the call of his Kufan supporters who wanted him to press his claim against Mu'awiya's son Yazid, who became the caliph in A.D. 679. Accompanied by a band of about 100, consisting mostly of the Prophet's family and some devoted followers, Husain was on his way to Kufa when he was stopped at Karbala by the soldiers of 'Ubad Ullah, the Umayyad governor of Kufa. In order to force him to surrender, the group which included a number of women and children was beleaguered and denied access to the Euphrates so that no drinking water was available to them. This situation persisted until the 10th of Muharram 61 A.H./October 10, 680, when the efforts of 'Amar b. Sa'd b. Abi Wakkas (who had taken command of the 4,000 men assembled at Karbala) to induce Husain to yield degenerated into a general melee²⁸ in which Husain and most of his party were brutally slain.

The tragedy of Karbala, the central event around which Shi'a messianism is built, raises many critical questions, some pointing toward the complex motives underlying the development of messianic ideas in both Shi'a and Sunni Islam. For instance, why did the Kufan Shi'as, who had sworn fealty to Husain and on whose insistence he was going to Kufa, do nothing to save his contingent from being massacred? How could government troops professing to be Muslims, with or without the direct orders of Yazid, act with such utter callousness and cruelty toward Husain and his party—who were not only Muslims guilty of no crime but also related to, or associated with, the Prophet's family?

However one answers these questions, one fact emerges clearly: The suffering and death of Husain and his companions left an indelible mark on Islam. At a conscious level, both Sunnis and Shi'as tried to deal with the guilt for the gruesome tragedy by attaching it to the person of Yazid, whose name became a symbol of inhumanity and injustice for all Muslims. But, at a deeper level of consciousness, the burden of this guilt came to rest upon Sunnis and Shi'as in general and was expressed by both, though in different ways. It was this guilt which, in my judgment, played a central role in "the moulding of Islam as a whole in a Shi'itic direction, until reverence for 'Ali and his Fatimid descendants had come to color in manifold ways the life of Sunni Islam."²⁹ In the case of Shi'a Islam, this guilt led, on the one hand, to mourning and lamentation (in

²⁸"Husain," in Gibb and Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopedia*, p. 342.

²⁹Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shi'a," p. 2.

which self-flagellation figured prominently) and, on the other hand, to the glorification of the few who took a stand for truth and justice against formidable odds and preferred to die rather than yield.

Since the tragedy of Karbala, it has been easy for those who feel powerless and disadvantaged in a society professing to be Islamic to identify with Husain both in terms of his struggle against oppressive, unjust power and his suffering that ended in martyrdom at the hands of the forces of the de facto ruler. In fact, the passion motive introduced into official Islam by the tragedy of Karbala has

so thoroughly penetrated the Shi'as that it has formed legends full of difficult historical problems, which makes even the lives of 'Alids, who never attained any prominence, and in martyrdom, usually through poison at the instigation of the caliphs, as in the cases of Hasan I, Djafar al-Sadiq, 'Ali al-Rida, and on the whole of each Imam of the "Twelvers."³⁰

It is of interest to note here that comparison is sometimes made between the crucifixion of Jesus and the martyrdom of Husain—events which are of pivotal importance to Christianity and to Shi'a Islam, respectively. Certainly there are similarities between the passion of Jesus and that of Husain, but, while the crucifixion of Jesus has a salvific significance for Christians, the martyrdom of Husain has no such significance, even though popular Islam often refers to Husain as the savior of Islamic values. It is not Husain's death which makes possible the establishment of the reign of God on earth; rather, it is the ruthless avenging by the final Islam of the murder of Husain and his companions which ushers in the millennium. The belief, whether historically supported or not, that all the imams (except the "hidden" one) have been martyred obviously strengthens the revenge motive. Without understanding the intensity of this motive it is hardly possible to understand either Shi'a messianism or the historical upheavals in the Shi'a world (e.g., the revolution in Iran).

Though the tragedy of Karbala has had tremendous impact upon the subsequent history of Islam, it did not lead to the immediate downfall of the Ummayyads. In fact, they continued to expand their power. By A.D. 714, their Arab armies had overrun Spain, advanced to Kashgar in Central Asia, and taken Sind and Multan in India.³¹ Once the period of expansion ended and Muslim armies began to meet reverses and to become preoccupied with their internal problems, greater pressure was put upon the caliphs "to find religiously acceptable solutions to social problems. It was an obligation that few caliphs were ready to accept."³² In A.D. 749/50 the converts of Khorasan in eastern Persia revolted, asking for "an imam of the Prophet's family."³³ Joined by most of the Yemeni

³⁰"Shi'a," p. 534.

³¹"History of Islam," p. 734.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

factions of Arabs, and with the support of the Shi'as as well as many religious scholars, the rebels overthrew and slew Marwan, the last Umayyad caliph, in August, A.D. 750,³⁴ after which the caliphate passed on to the House of 'Abbas, an uncle of the Prophet.

The Shi'as had supported the 'Abbasids in the hope that they would restore the caliphate to the 'Alids. When this was not done, and when the Shi'as discovered that the 'Abbasids were no less hostile to them than the Umayyads had been, they became very bitter and disillusioned. It was during this period that the term "Shi'a"

was invested with its basic political and religious connotations. The Shi'ites claimed that the House of 'Abbas had usurped the Caliphate as the Umayyads and the three Orthodox Caliphs had done. They contended that, although de facto sovereignty vested in the 'Abbasids, legal sovereignty remained with the descendants of 'Ali who were divinely ordained to be the temporal and religious leaders of Islamic peoples.³⁵

The Shi'as remained united in their recognition of the first three imams, 'Ali (d. A.D. 661), Hasan (d. A.D. 670), and Husain (d. A.D. 680). Thereafter, a small group called the "Al-Zaidiya" (Zaidites) broke away under the leadership of Zaid, the grandson of Husain. The Zaidiya who do not share in the messianic ideas of the rest of the Shi'as remain identified as "Shi'a" because of their insistence that the leadership of the Muslim ummah remains within the descendants of the Prophet (*ahl-al-bait*), but they do not accept the idea of either a child imam or a concealed Mahdi and consider expertise in war or scholarship to be necessary qualifications for an imam.³⁶

Apart from the Zaidiya, all Shi'as recognize Zain al-'Abidin (d. A.D. 731) as the fourth imam, Muhammad Baqir (d. A.D. 731) as the fifth, and Ja'far Sadiq (d. A.D. 765) as the sixth. An event occurred during the sixth imamate which led to a major split within Shi'a Islam. Rumor spread of the death of Isma'il, the imam-designate, which threw "the legitimist Shi'a who believe that the character of imam is transmitted by divine providence from father to son"³⁷ into confusion and gave rise to much speculation about the nature of the imamate. After the death of the sixth imam, the Shi'as split into various groups, the most important of which are the Ithna-'Ashariyya ("Twelvers") and the Sab'iya ("Seveners"). The latter are also known as the Isma'iliyya, since they are followers of Isma'il whom they recognize as the seventh imam, denying that he predeceased his father. The former (who constitute the largest group among the Shi'as) recognize Musa Kazim (d. A.D. 799) as the seventh imam, 'Ali Rida (d. A.D. 818) as

³⁴Abid, "Political Theory of the Shi'ites," p. 734.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶"Al-Zaidiya," in Gibb and Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopedia*, p. 651.

³⁷"Sab'iya," in *ibid.*, p. 478.

the eighth, Muhammad Taqi (d. A.D. 835) as the ninth, 'Ali Naqi (d. A.D. 868) as the tenth, Hasan 'Askari (d. A.D. 874) as the eleventh, and Muhammad Mahdi (disappeared in A.D. 874) as the twelfth.³⁸

According to Ithna-'Ashariyya tradition, the twelfth imam, "the Mahdi," was born in Samarra in A.D. 868 or 869. When he was five or six years old, he was designated as the imam by his father a few days before the latter's death. Soon afterward, the twelfth imam disappeared or went into concealment. The first phase of the period of concealment—known as the "lesser concealment"—is described thus by D. M. Donaldson:

[F]or a period of about seventy years he was represented on earth by "wakils," i.e., by agents or advocates. The first of these was 'Uthman ibn Sa'id. When 'Uthman died he was succeeded by his son, Abu Ja'far, who in turn also designated Abu 'l-Kasim ibn Ruh, who appointed Abu'l-Hasan Samarri. When the latter was about to die they urged him to designate someone in his place, but he refused, and replied, "Now the matter is with God."³⁹

Since the end of the "lesser concealment," around A.D. 939, the twelfth imam is believed to be in the "greater concealment" and is not expected to return until just before the end of time.

It is of interest to observe that, in the Ithna-'Ashariyya tradition, during the concealment of the last imam the responsibility for solving theological problems and juristic questions falls upon the righteous and learned scholars who exercise *ijtihad* and are known as "*mujtahids*." The *mujtahids*, who are considered to be "the caliphs of the imam," have always been very influential in Shi'a states and societies and are "supposed to derive their wisdom and acumen from the representative of the hidden Imam who is in contact with them."⁴⁰ In Shi'a Iran of today, the Ayatollah Khomeini is widely believed to be the *locum tenens* of the "hidden" imam and thus the "Imam of the Present Age." Much of the power he wields among the Shi'as of Iran and elsewhere undoubtedly derives from this belief.

As Shi'a Islam developed, due to various historical circumstances the idea of the imam, which in the beginning was relatively simple, became highly intricate. Several theories of the imamate⁴¹ as well as "an increasingly complex theological and metaphysical cult of the Mahdi"⁴² were elaborated and systematized at the cost of enormous time and labor. A discussion of these theories (which bear the

³⁸Abid, "Political Theory of the Shi'ites," p. 738.

³⁹Dwight M. Donaldson, *The Shi'ite Religion: A History of Islam in Persia and Irak* (London: Luzac and Co., 1933), p. 235.

⁴⁰S. M. H. Tabatabai, *Shi'ite Islam*, ed. and tr. S. H. Nasr (Houston: Free Islamic Literatures, Inc., 1979), p. 211.

⁴¹E.g., see "Imam" in Gibb and Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopedia*, pp. 165-166.

⁴²Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), p. 218.

imprint of numerous influences such as the Near Eastern, Christian, Gnostic, and Neoplatonic) is beyond the scope of this article. It is important, however, to draw attention to the following eight beliefs and ideas which are found in these theories, since they figure prominently in Shi'a messianism:

1. The imams (who are descendants of 'Ali and Fatima) have the divine right to be successors to the Prophet. They possess authority not only in the religious sphere but also in the temporal. This authority is vested in them primarily due to their relationship to the Prophet and also because they are regarded as the ancestors of the ruling kings.⁴³

2. Each imam's authority is hereditary, received from his own father by the latter's special nomination (*nass*).⁴⁴

3. The imams alone are able to understand and communicate the esoteric meaning of the divine revelation, since only they carry what S. H. Nasr describes as "the Muhammadan Light" (*al-nur al-muhammadi*) by virtue of which the imam is able both to interpret the exoteric and esoteric meaning of the religious sciences and law and to guide his followers in their spiritual life.⁴⁵

4. While engaging in *ta'wil* or hermeneutic interpretation of the Qur'an and proceeding from the exoteric to the esoteric meaning, the imams rely on the miraculous guidance of God and are, therefore, infallible⁴⁶ or, more precisely, protected (*ma'sum*)⁴⁷ from error or sin.

5. Like the Prophets before them, the imams have been given knowledge of the "Great Name of God" which the Prophets communicated only to their vicegerents, and, like the Prophets, they also possess the gift of miracle-performing as a sign of God's favor and a validation of their truth claims.⁴⁸

6. Though the world can be without a Prophet at times, it can "never be devoid of the presence of the Imam be he even hidden or unknown," since it is "the Imam who, in his continuous presence, sustains and preserves the religion from one period to the next."⁴⁹

7. The imams are not ordinary human beings but are an epiphany of God⁵⁰ and "may be thought of as a primordial idea in the mind of God which found temporal manifestation in persons occupying a position midway between human and divine beings."⁵¹ The relation between the imams and God is "approximately the same as that between Jesus Christ and the Deity in Christian theology."⁵²

⁴³Ibid, "Political Theory of the Shi'ites," p. 736.

⁴⁴"Imam," p. 165.

⁴⁵Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 160-162.

⁴⁶"Imam," p. 165.

⁴⁷Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, p. 65.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, p. 162.

⁵⁰"Shi'a," p. 135.

⁵¹Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, p. 54.

⁵²"Imam," p. 166.

8. The return of the Mahdi will signal "the fulfilment of the mission of all the Prophets before him."⁵³ This imam, whose birth was miraculous and who (like Moses and Jesus) was saved from being killed at birth, was believed to be the descendant not only of the Prophet but also of the Byzantine emperor.⁵⁴ Though the time of his return is known only to God, it will be preceded by a long period of chaos and ungodliness. "Like Christ and other saviors, the Mahdi will save humanity and the entire creation from degeneration."⁵⁵ He will also

destroy the holy House of Mecca, the 'Ka'bah, except for the first foundations which were raised by Adam and Abraham and his son Ishmael, for what was built subsequently was not built by a Prophet or vicegerent. From his headquarters in Kufah, the Mahdi will send his armies of men, angels and jinn to conquer the entire earth. He will avenge the blood of Husain so that he ". . . would kill the descendants of the murders of Husain in punishment for the deeds of their fathers". . . The Mahdi shall purify the earth of all evil, wrongdoing and falsehood. . . . He will "call men to Islam anew" and guide them to the truth. There will be no unbeliever at that time who will not return to the true faith, nor will there be any corruption in men or things. All infirmities will be healed and all disease, poverty and privation will disappear forever.⁵⁶

Here, it is of interest to note that although the Sa'biya, like the Ithna-'Ashariyya, waited for the return of the Mahdi, conceived of as a personal messianic figure, they came to interpret the concept of the "Mahdi" differently when the Fatimids came to power in A.D. 909. After the establishment of this dynasty,

every Caliph . . . was named "al-qa'im" and thus the idea of the Mahdi became merged, so to speak in the Imamate, in the dynasty whose mission comes to include the objects which the Mahdi was to effect, if not under an Imam, then under one of his successors.⁵⁷

Having outlined the main components of Shi'a messianism, I would make seven observations about them, as follows:

1. Shi'a Islam and the theory of the imamate rests upon the idea that blood kinship to the Prophet confers superiority and merit in this world as well as the next. Arab tribalism and excessive pride in one's ancestry and progeny were greatly discouraged by both the Qur'an and the Prophet. According to the Qur'an, blood ties are not a guarantor of merit; stories are told, for instance, of Abraham's father and Noah's son, who were condemned for their wrong beliefs and actions, even though the former was a Prophet's father, and the latter, a

⁵³Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, p. 226.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 227

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, "Political Theory of the Shi'ites," p. 743.

Prophet's son. That blood relationships will be of no help to anyone on the day of judgment is pointed out by the Qur'an in several verses (e.g., see Al-'Imrān 3:9, 115; Luqmān 31:22; Sabā' 34:37; Al-Mujadalah 58:17; Al-Mumtaḥanah 60:3; 'Abasa 80:34-37).

2. Shi'a Islam came to regard the imam as being more than human. As pointed out in section I, above, the Qur'an vehemently denies the possibility that any human being, including the Prophets, can be more than human. Here, the following observation by Syed 'Abid Ali 'Abid, which explains how the imams acquired a superhuman status, is of interest:

In all great Eastern empires of the remote past the kings at some time or another claimed to be gods or semi-gods at least, perhaps in order to stabilize the State and to keep the subject races unified through the worship of the sovereign. When we consider that the Shi'ite theologians and historians have accepted it as a fact that a daughter of the last Sassanian King of Persia was married to Husain (all Imams being descended from her), it becomes easy enough to appreciate the position of the Persian adherents of 'Ali in relation to the Caliphate and the Imamate. The fact that many of the Shi'ite sects believed in the Godhead of 'Ali further lends support to the theory that the concept of the divine right of the Imams to succeed the Prophet had infiltrated into Arabia through Persian channels.⁵⁸

3. Shi'a Islam holds that the imams are infallible and protected from error and sin. There is nothing in the Qur'an which sustains this claim. Also, from the point of view of logic, this claim (which derives from the belief that the imams are divinely ordained and that they possess "divine qualities"⁵⁹) presents difficulties, as is illustrated by the case of Isma'il. Since at one point in time Isma'il was declared to be the imam-designate by his father, Shi'a Islam (out of the necessity to be self-consistent) would have to say that he was divinely ordained to be the imam and an epiphany of God. But, if this were the case, Isma'il could not die before his father, nor could he be guilty of sin. This, in fact, is what Isma'il's followers maintained, and their position, though fraught with historical problems, was philosophically more consistent than that of the Ithna-'Ashariyya. Not dealing directly with the possibility that Isma'il could have died before his father (which would bring into question the idea of the imams' being divinely ordained), nor being able to admit that an imam could be guilty of sin, the latter alleged that Isma'il had lost the status of imam-designate when he was found drinking wine. But, if the imams were divinely appointed, then an imam-designate had to be as protected from sin or error as an imam. Hence, Isma'il, once recognized as his father's heir, could not then be deemed to be capable of committing a sin.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 736.

⁵⁹Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, p. 54.

4. Shi'a Islam regards the imam as extending the Prophet's function, as inheriting not only his temporal authority but also his religious and "prophetic" role and attributes, and holds that the world can never be without an imam. The Qur'an describes Muhammad as the "Seal of the Prophets," which orthodox Islam interprets as meaning that there would be no more Prophets after Muhammad, and the caliph who succeeded Muhammad as the leader of the Muslim ummah after the Prophet's demise claimed to have no "prophetic" quality or function. Here, Muhammad Iqbal's argument in defense of the finality of Muhammad's prophethood (advanced in the context of refuting the claim of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, who declared himself to be the promised Messiah and the Mahdi in 1908) is of interest and importance. According to Iqbal:

The birth of Islam . . . is the birth of the inductive intellect. In Islam prophecy reaches its perfection in discovering the need of its own abolition. This involves the keen perception that life cannot for ever be kept in leading strings, that in order to achieve full self-consciousness man must finally be thrown back on his own resources. The abolition of priesthood and hereditary kingship in Islam, the constant appeal to reason and experience in the Qur'an and the emphasis that it lays on Nature and History as sources of human knowledge, are all different aspects of the same idea of finality.⁶⁰

In my judgment, Iqbal's viewpoint is grounded in qur'anic teachings and is in sharp opposition to the Shi'a idea that an imam is needed at all times to perform the Prophet's temporal and religious functions.

5. Shi'a Islam regards the imam as an intermediary between human beings and God, and his intercession is sought by his followers for peace and prosperity in this world and the next. As pointed out in section I, above, the Qur'an rejects the idea of human intercession. The only real intercessor is God, as stated for instance in Al-An'am 6:51, 70; and Az-Zumar 39:40. In Bani Isrā'il 17:56-57, the Qur'an also points out that those who themselves seek access to God—as presumably Prophets, imams, and Sufis all do—cannot themselves become instruments of other persons' salvation.

6. Shi'a Islam focuses heavily upon the Mahdi; however, there is no reference to this concept in the Qur'an. As pointed out by the *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*:

[I]t is singular that the word "mahdi" (the past participle of the I stem) never occurs in the Qur'an and that the passive of that stem occurs only four times. In the usage of the Qur'an the VII stem, "ihtada", strictly "he accepted guidance for himself", is used as a

⁶⁰Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1962), p. 126.

quasi or reflexive passive. Thus the man whom Allah guides is not simply “guided” but reacts himself to the divine guidance.⁶¹

Further, as stated by D. M. Donaldson:

The term that occurs in the Koran . . . is not “al-mahdi”, the one guided, but the active participle, “al-hadi”, the guide (Surahs xxii, 53; and xxv, 33). In the first reference it is declared that “God is surely the Guider of those who believe”, and the second reference states, “But thy Lord is a sufficient guide and helper!” It is obvious that these references are not in themselves sufficient to justify the expectation of the coming of the “Mahdi”, but they have been subsequently utilised as a background for an elaborate premillennial hope which is based on traditions.⁶²

7. Shi'a Islam has developed a network of intense messianic expectations around the idea of the Mahdi's “return.” It is attested by a Shi'a scholar that

The personality of the hidden Imam has provided Shi'i piety with rich soil for the most fantastic hagiographical imagination. Indeed, some of the traditions, especially those dealing with his return, have been a source of embarrassment for Shi'i “ulama” and traditionists.⁶³

Justification for messianic expectations related to the Mahdi's return is sought in some traditions that are attributed to the Prophet. It is important to note here that Ibn Khaldun did not accept these traditions as authentic, since they

are not included in the great works of Bukhari or Muslim and he questioned the right of Tirmidhi and of Abu Dā'ūd to rely on the authority of 'Asim, for as he pointed out, on the testimony of several of his contemporaries, “all the 'Asims have had bad memories!”⁶⁴

As noted in section II, above, the Qur'an does not encourage the devout to wait for a savior-figure who will appear near the end of time. They must accept responsibility for their lives, individually and collectively, here and now, striving to live in accordance with God's commandments, and seeking no “supernatural” help—save that of God. Such an attitude obviously militates strongly against the messianic ideas and beliefs of Shi'a Islam.

⁶¹“Al-Mahdi,” in Gibb and Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopedia*, p. 310.

⁶²Donaldson, *The Shi'ite Religion*, p. 226.

⁶³Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, p. 217.

⁶⁴Donaldson, *The Shi'ite Religion*, pp. 227-228.

III. Some Personal Reflections on Messianism and Islam

The discussion of messianism in sections I and II, above, leads to a question of fundamental importance to Islam even though it has not been pondered deeply by Muslims: Why has messianism in its various forms been such a pervasive element in Muslim societies when it is not warranted by the Qur'an and is, in fact, antithetical to the spirit of the Qur'an? That not only Shi'a but also Sunni Muslims have widely believed in the coming of the Mahdi is testified to by no less an authority than Ibn Khaldun, who observed in his *Muqaddima*:

It has been commonly accepted among the masses of the people of Islam, as the ages have passed, that there must needs appear in the End of Time a man of the family of Muhammad who will aid the Faith and make justice triumph, that the Muslims will follow him, and that he will reign over the Muslim kingdoms and be called al-Mahdi.⁶⁵

That messianism has become a part of Islamic orthodoxy and tradition is also acknowledged by Fazlur Rahman, even though he painstakingly shows that messianism was not a part of original Islam and that its influence on the Muslim masses has been vastly detrimental in many ways. In his concluding chapter in *Islam*, he stated:

Certain beliefs which originated from Sufistic or allied sources have gradually become part even of the orthodox system of belief. Examples of this are Messianism, i.e., belief in the Second Advent of Jesus and in the Mahdi, belief in the miracles of saints, etc. That these doctrines, taken literally, are morally harmful is obvious; that they have actually caused incalculable harm to Muslim society is also a glaring fact of history. As for Messianism, it was originally adopted in Islam either by Shi'ism or Sufism, but in any case it came to Sunni Islam through the Sufis or rather the precursors of the Sufis—the public preachers of the 2nd/8th century who consoled and satisfied the politically disillusioned and morally starved masses by holding out Messianic hopes . . . the early Hadith-material which had come into existence for the quite different purpose of declaring as religiously authoritative the results of the activity of the first three generations, was later given a new twist and invested with a Messianic import. Thus the Hadith, “Honor my Companions, then the following generation and then the next following generation . . .”, came into the now famous version “The best generation is mine, then the next one . . .” This was taken to mean that history must go from bad to worse and was doomed unless and until the Messiah or the Mahdi appear. But Jesus and the Mahdi are fundamentally eschatological not historical figures. History is thus condemned and an inevitable

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 228.

historical pessimism is the result. That such a belief, if strictly adopted, must numb the moral faculties and human initiative hardly calls for an analysis. But the doctrine both of the Second Advent of Jesus and of the Mahdi was adopted by orthodoxy, probably because it had already become part of the commonly accepted beliefs.⁶⁶

Even if one can substantiate that messianism is not a part of the Qur'anic teaching or of original Islam, the fact that it was able not only to penetrate the world of Islam but also to continue to prevail through the ages up to the present day remains to be confronted. Is messianism no more than a "fifth-column conspiracy" engineered by the disgruntled elements of Muslim society in order to undermine Islam from within—as is sometimes suggested by scholars who deplore its existence—or is it a response to a serious deficiency in Islam as it became embodied in history? Although the role played by a variety of "dissidents" in the rise of messianism among Muslims is certainly significant—as attested by both Sunni and Shi'a scholars—in my judgment, it does not fully account for or explain either the emergence or the continuance of messianism in the Muslim world. By pointing out that messianism is "unIslamic" or bemoaning the "incalculable harm" that it has done to Muslim society, one cannot controvert the fact that messianism has filled a large void in the life of the Muslim masses since the early centuries of Islam. A profound analysis of Muslim history and consciousness is called for so that the deeply embedded needs to which messianism is a response can be correctly identified. This critically important task, if earnestly and honestly pursued, leads one to the heart of the Muslim religious experience.

While it is not possible within the scope of this article to engage in a detailed discussion of the historical and psychological reasons underlying the multifaceted messianism found among Muslims, I would like to offer a few personal reflections on this subject.

The first reflection relates to the way in which Muslims experienced God both during the infancy of Islam and during its later development and how this experience formed the basis of their life attitudes. Literary and historical evidence appears to indicate that the Prophet of Islam and the early Muslims experienced God in an intimate or personal way and that to them the Qur'an as the Word of God was a source not just of perennial wisdom leading to enlightenment but also of enormous energy leading to action. To these Muslims, God was not a philosophical abstraction or a distant High God who, having created the world, had withdrawn from active participation in it. These Muslims could commit their lives to struggling *fi sabil Allah* (in the cause of God) and trying to understand, assimilate, and actualize the Word of God in terms of both inner and outer reality, because to them God was, indeed, closer than their jugular vein (see Qāf 50:16). Though the Qur'an describes God frequently in terms of attri-

⁶⁶Rahman, *Islam*, p. 304.

butes such as omnipotence and love, justice and compassion, and might and beauty, the early Muslims experienced God not as a composite of separate or separable attributes but as an indivisible unity. Experiencing God as One and All, the early Muslims possessed a high degree of centeredness which enabled them to internalize the truths revealed by God and to go forth into the world believing that “Sufficient is Allah for a friend and sufficient is Allah for a helper” (An-Nisā’ 4:45).

As long as Muslims could experience God directly, they had no need for intermediaries or intercessors. However, as Muslim society changed from being God-centered to being empire-centered, and as its emphasis shifted from seeking to create an order reflecting the love, mercy, justice, knowledge, truth, and goodness of God to preserving the vested interests of certain persons or groups, large numbers of Muslims began to feel alienated from the historical expressions of Islamic ideals. This sense of alienation led to deep insecurity and anxiety. Both the Qur’an and the Prophet had been particularly sensitive to the plight of disadvantaged persons and had pointed out, with clarity and insistence, the complementarity of *Haquq Allah* (obligations of human beings to God) and *Haquq al-’ibad* (obligations of human beings to other human beings).

It was inconsistent with the image of an ummah professing to be totally obedient to God’s will that it should tolerate, let alone foster, any form of oppression or injustice. However, during much of their history, the Muslim masses have, in fact, been subjected to varying degrees of oppression and injustice. In the modern period, under all the additional pressures of modernity, the sense of things being “out of joint,” which had been brought about earlier by the widening gap between Islam-in-theory and Islam-in-practice, has become even more intense among them. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has observed insightfully:

The fundamental malaise of modern Islam is a sense that something has gone wrong with Islamic history. The fundamental problem of modern Muslims is how to rehabilitate that history: to set it going again in full vigor, so that Islamic society may once again flourish as a divinely guided society should and must. The fundamental spiritual crisis of Islam in the twentieth century stems from an awareness that something is awry between the religion which God has appointed and the historical development of the world which [God] controls.⁶⁷

Unable through their own resources to rehabilitate the history with which they are so preoccupied, Muslim masses have turned to messianism as a means of wish-fulfilment and as an escape from the harsh realities which beset their lives. Feeling that they do not have direct access to God or to those who rule over them in the name of God, they have sought the help of those God-seekers whom

⁶⁷Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 41.

they believe to have been dear to God. Preeminent among these “messianic” or “charismatic” figures is, of course, the Prophet, who had been regarded, since his youth, as a model to be admired and emulated, and who in time became the beloved leader of a nascent community. Though he strongly resisted being mythologized during his lifetime, it is hardly surprising—given the human need to eternalize what is perceived as “perfection” and the desire of the young Muslim ummah to fill the vacuum created by his death—that the Prophet became a cult figure for many of his followers or that his words and acts (Hadith and Sunnah) came to be regarded as “divine.” The metaphysical status given to the imam, who was regarded as the epiphany of God by the Shi’as, was also attached to Muhammad by some Sufis (e.g., those of the school of Sahl as-Tustari),⁶⁸ while later generations of Muslims tended to regard not only Muhammad but also all his descendants (generally called “Saiyyads” or “Sharifs”)⁶⁹ as possessors of *baraka* (the state of being blessed or holy) with redemptive or intercessory powers. To the present day, most Muslims put a high premium on being a descendant of the Prophet, and Saiyyads are the undisputed “highest caste” in what is supposedly a casteless society which rejects the idea that either ancestry or progeny determines one’s ultimate worth or destiny.

At this juncture, it might be of interest to make a few observations on the interrelationship between Shi’a Islam and Sufism, the two main agencies for the spread of messianism among Muslims. Both were protests against what may be described as “establishment” or mainstream Islam, which they viewed as being too worldly and corrupt, but, whereas Shi’a Islam upheld the belief that the rules of God on earth could only be established through the instrumentality of the imams who were directly descended from the Prophet and divinely appointed to lead the Muslim ummah, the Sufis maintained—at least in the beginning—that it was possible for any believer to have direct access to God. In time, however, Sufism was so heavily colored by Shi’a Islam that there appeared many “schools” of Sufis centering on *pir* or *murshid* (the counterpart of the imam or the “guru”) and having a hierarchical structure not dissimilar to the one found in Shi’a Islam. It is noteworthy that many Shi’a doctrines were implanted in Sunni Islam by or through Sufism. For instance, the Sufis “borrowed the mystique of Ali, moderated it and stamped it on Orthodox Islam which the latter accepted.”⁷⁰ But, though Sufism borrowed the idea of “messianic” or “charismatic” figures from Shi’a Islam, it did not share the particularism of the Shi’as and recognized the nearness to God of all true seekers of God, not merely the imams. The antagonism of the Shi’as toward Sufism, caused by the Sufi claim of direct access to God, was exacerbated by the fact that Shi’a Islam lost many of its followers to Sufism, which spread rapidly through both Muslim and non-Muslim lands.

⁶⁸Rahman, *Islam*, p. 212.

⁶⁹Dietrich von Denffer, “Baraka as Basic Concept of Muslim Popular Belief,” *Islamic Studies* 15 (Autumn, 1976): 170.

⁷⁰Rahman, *Islam*, p. 212.

Returning to the main subject of the first reflection, namely, the way in which Muslims have experienced God through the ages, in my judgment Shi'a Islam and Sufism provided Islam as a whole with cult-figures (ranging from the Prophet of Islam and the imams to the Sufi-saints abounding in the Muslim world), who became the focus of attention and devotion as God could, and should, have been if Muslim preachers had stressed God's immanence along with God's transcendence, and if they had not made Muslim masses so fearful of God's omnipotence and chastisement that they felt far removed from God's love and compassion. Undoubtedly, the cult-figures around which Muslim messianism is built were perceived, initially, as gateways to God and not as "substitutes" for God, but human history is fraught with examples of means becoming ends, and the cult figures to which Muslims pay such fervent homage took the place of God, practically if not theoretically, in the lives of many Muslims. It is no slight irony that Sufism, which had originally dedicated itself to liberating Muslims from all that was not-God, and which had insisted that God alone was worthy of being the center of human life, became the prime agency for providing alternate objects of ultimate concern, reverence, and adoration to the Muslim masses.

The second reflection relates to the way in which Muslims have, since the stupendously successful first chapter of Muslim history was written, identified Islam with temporal success and power and how lack of success and power creates not only a psychological but also a religious crisis for them. Though *sabr* (patient enduring of adversity or calamity) is a virtue commended by the Qur'an and practiced by many Muslims individually, it is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of Muslims that the course of Islam which embodies God's final revelation must be a triumphant one, both in history and beyond.

It is worth noting that the first Muslims who laid the foundations of what became one of history's largest empires did not set out to conquer the world but regarded themselves as servants of God whose mission was to establish a just society in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet. Very conscious of their moral responsibility to God and God's creatures, they led simple lives, free of avarice and arrogance. Many of their successors, however, became so trapped in their mundane history, so engrossed in the pomp as well as the problems of empire, that they lost sight of that which was beneath, above, and beyond history. The increasing worldliness of the Muslim ummah provoked a strong reaction among the pious (generally referred to as the Sufis), who repudiated the identification of Islam with earthly glory and dominion and exemplified their belief that a life surrendered to God (which is what "Islam" means) was a life of "servanthood" to God and God's creatures and was characterized by simplicity, humility, and love, rather than by the emblems of temporal power and prosperity.

The spirit of the early Sufis, which was in marked contrast to the imperialism of the Muslim elite as well as to the legalism of those who considered themselves the guardians of the Shari'ah, impressed itself upon the consciousness of the Muslim masses, and Sufism spread very quickly, especially among those who

felt excluded from the power structure. The irony and tragedy of the situation was that most of the people who flocked to the Sufis did not seek the God-centered life that the Sufis sought, but rather sought what the Sufis had refused to seek: worldly possessions and power. In order to understand the profound appeal which the Sufis had for those Muslims who did not share their basic outlook, it is necessary to remember that the vast majority of Muslims—who to this day have remained illiterate and unenlightened due to the unjust and inequitable socio-economic and political systems prevalent in the Muslim world—received the Word of God from preachers who constantly spoke of God's wrath's being directed toward those who failed to follow the *sirat al-mustaqeem* (the path to eternal bliss prescribed by the Qur'an), without caring a whit about their existential problems or about helping them discover or develop their inner resources required for following the path. The "average" Muslim, taught that the regular performance of religious rituals and duties was necessary and sufficient for securing both material and spiritual rewards, performed these rituals and duties regularly, but often without understanding their deeper meaning or attaining their higher purpose, namely, to establish a link between the individual Muslim and God. Unable to reach God by the means available to them, masses of "average" Muslims turned to the God-loving Sufis to fulfill a variety of unfulfilled needs, particularly the need for emotional support in the hour of suffering and the need for "supernatural" assistance in attaining the material ends which were otherwise unattainable.

The problem of suffering is, of course, extremely complex theologically and psychologically. The question—"If God is good, compassionate, and omnipotent, why is there human suffering?"—is certainly one of the most difficult of all theological questions to answer, even though all major religious traditions of the world have attempted to find an adequate explanation for human suffering in the context of their respective frameworks.

In his book, *Problems of Suffering in the Religions of the World*, John Bowker correctly states: "The Qur'an . . . starts where Judaism and Christianity start, with the actual facts of suffering, not with suffering conceived as a theoretical problem. Suffering is a part of what it means to be alive. Yet there is a clear realisation in the Qur'an that the facts of suffering create certain problems."⁷¹ But the latter part of his contention that "whereas in Christianity suffering occurs as a problem principally because it conflicts with the assertion that God is love, in Islam it occurs principally because it conflicts with the belief that God is omnipotent"⁷² misses the main point of the qur'anic statements referring to how and why human beings suffer. While God's omnipotence is repeatedly affirmed by the Qur'an, one of its most important themes is that human beings who possess rationality and free will are responsible for their actions. The

⁷¹(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 101.

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 102.

Qur'an, which is theologically free of the doctrine of Original Sin and psychologically free of the guilt engendered by this doctrine, does not locate suffering in the context of God's omnipotence; rather, it sees it principally as the inevitable result of human beings' committing *zulm an-nafs* (wronging themselves or transgressing the laws of their own being). For instance, persistent neglect of the human body will cause the organism to break down internally without any punishment being inflicted upon it by God. While punishment can also come from the outside, in the case of both individuals (e.g., Noah's son and Lot's wife) and communities (e.g., the people of 'Ad and Thamud), it is a clear statement of the Qur'an that suffering "from above," as it were, is not inflicted upon anyone unjustly or without due warning. According to the qur'anic perspective, human beings can avoid much suffering by living rightly or justly and would do so if they acted rationally. This is one of the major reasons that the Qur'an constantly advocates the use of *'aql* (reason) in human life.

Besides the suffering which human beings bring upon themselves, the Qur'an also recognizes other kinds of suffering. The often-repeated exhortation to believers that they should not be overwhelmed by fear, sorrow, or anxiety when confronted by adversity or calamity, but to be patient and persevering, trusting that God will give them strength and courage, follows from an awareness that some measure of suffering is a concomitant of the human condition and is thus inescapable. However, it is clearly and strongly commanded by the Qur'an that suffering by the innocent and the powerless who are victimized by an inequitable or oppressive socio-economic, political, or religious force or system must be contested and eliminated as far as possible. To accept such suffering passively would be tantamount to collaboration with an unjust order, which no Muslim is permitted to do.

Finally, the Qur'an makes particular mention of the suffering of those who engage in *jihad fi sabil Allah* (struggle in the way of God), choosing to live a life of hardship, exile, or persecution in order to validate their belief in God and the truths revealed by God. Such suffering, which the Qur'an describes as a test of faith, is regarded by popular piety as a sign of grace, since God only tests the faith of those who have faith. Iqbal expresses this belief in the language of poetry when he says to the faithful that they should not seek to guard themselves against heartbreak, for to God a heart that is broken is more precious than one that is whole.⁷³

As the above account shows, the Qur'an identifies different kinds of human suffering and prescribes ways of dealing with each kind. Its tone is pragmatic—reminiscent of the Buddha, the focus of whose words was on suggesting practical ways of alleviating suffering, rather than on discussing it intellectually—but its teachings relating to suffering have seldom reached the hearts and minds of the Muslim masses, perhaps because they are unable to accept the idea that much of

⁷³Muhammad Iqbal, *Bang-e-Dara* (Lahore: Shaikh Ghulam Ali and Sons, n.d.), p. 314.

their suffering is self-caused or that suffering caused by human injustice must be resisted. Though the Qur'an is a very human document which constantly affirms the concern and compassion of God for all creatures, its imperative that all human beings develop their own strength and achieve their full human potential through their own striving seems rather "tough" to those Muslims who feel that they are weak and unable to live up to the ideals and expectations it projects. These Muslims, like many other human beings, especially in times of trial and tribulation, feel they need succor from a visible, tangible source or a "messianic" figure who can not only share their human suffering but also act as their intercessor before an invisible, intangible God.

While God-centered Muslims through the ages have accepted suffering as a necessary part of their *jihad fi sabil Allah* and neither idealized nor romanticized it, their suffering has become the focal point of the passion of the Muslim masses. The suffering of the innocent—and particularly their martyrdom—is, of course, a very powerful theme in religious messianism, one that received much elaboration in Shi'a Islam, which attributed martyrdom to all the imams in order to highlight the purity and pathos of their lives. The Muslim masses, both Shi'a and Sunni, have derived great emotional strength from their belief that not only they suffer but so also do those who are nearest and dearest to God. The fact that the just and the righteous have often suffered more than the "average" believer has consoled the Muslim masses, who find the idea of suffering's being indiscriminate or unrelated to justice more supportable than the idea that human beings are responsible for much of their own suffering.

Muslims seek the help of "messianic" figures not only in coping with the problem of suffering but also in attaining worldly ends. It is interesting to observe how many Muslims visit even the remotest shrine in the Muslim world and how few seek anything but material goods. Since the desire to acquire that which increases one's worth in society is almost universal, the things yearned for by the Muslim masses as they perform their devotions at their "favorite" shrines are a good index of the value-systems of Muslim societies. As pointed out above, since its early history Islam has been identified by Muslims with triumphal living here and now; being "victorious" is part of the self-image of a "good" Muslim. Hence Muslims are driven, more than many others, to seek success and power in order to vindicate both their personal religious identity and their collective faith.

The irony of supplicating those who cared so little for material things to become instruments in the acquisition of such things has already been noted. It should be mentioned further that Muslims have often projected their own dreams of earthly glory and grandeur on their "patron saints" and have built magnificent shrines to mark the tombs of those who chose to live in poverty. Muslim literature also contains many references to the "kingly" state of Sufis and other saintly persons. Muslims consider it appropriate to attach images and emblems of royalty to such persons, probably because they were perceived as possessors of enormous power even though they had no earthly kingdom. In my judgment, perhaps the greatest obsession of Muslims is with power under-

stood primarily in temporal or material terms. However, spiritual power is also respected if it becomes manifest in history. Muslims such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Colonel Qaddafi, and even Muhammad Ali become "charismatic" figures for Muslims because they are seen as representing power and success. If they should cease to be identified with power, their charismatic power is likely to vanish, as happened in the case of the late Shah of Iran who was a cult figure not only for millions of Iranian Muslims but also for many other "modernist" Muslims.

An interesting and significant illustration of how the spiritual power of "messianic" figures is used by the Muslim masses to gain temporal power is provided by women who form the majority of those who frequent the shrines of "saints." Fatima Mernissa has observed:

At bottom, women in an unflinchingly patriarchal society seek through the saint's mediation a bigger share of power, of control. One area in which they seek almost total control is reproduction and sexuality, the central notions of any patriarchal system's definition of women, classical orthodox Islam included. Women who are desperate to find husbands, women whose husbands have sexual problems, women who have lost their husband's love or their own reproductive capacities go to the saint to get help and find solutions. One of the most important functions of sanctuaries is precisely their own involvement with sexuality and fertility. Indeed, if power can be defined as "the chance of a person or a number of persons to realize their own will in a communal action, even against the resistance of others, who are participating in the action,"⁷⁴ then women's collaboration with saints is definitely a power operation. Excluded from ritualistic orthodox religion, women walking in processions around saints' tombs express their quest for power in the vast horizons of the sacred space, untouched, unspoiled by human authority and its hierarchies.⁷⁵

Women are perhaps the most disadvantaged members of a "typical" Muslim society because, though neither minors nor mentally deficient, they are rigidly and systematically denied what matters supremely in such a society, namely, the right to power, except in a limited sense in the narrow domain of the home. The fact that one can see a number of Muslim women working in institutions or driving cars in major cities today does not invalidate this statement, because, though Muslim societies are gradually granting women the right to engage in educational, social, or professional activities, they are still, by and large, denied the right to hold positions which signify power. Even in this age of feminism, the

⁷⁴Max Weber, *From Max Weber, Essays in Sociology*, tr. and ed. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 180 (quoted in Fatima Mernissa, "Women, Saints, and Sanctuaries," *Signs* 3 [Autumn, 1977]: 107).

⁷⁵Mernissa, "Women," p. 107.

lives of most Muslim women are still totally or largely controlled by men, and their participation in communal worship in mosques, if permitted at all, remains marginal. Messianism provides one of the few means of psychic, emotional, and spiritual survival available to women in Muslim societies. As Fatima Mernissi has said: "Sanctuaries, which are the locus of antiestablishment, antipatriarchal mythical figures, provide women with a space where complaint and verbal vituperations against the system's injustices are allowed and encouraged. They give women the opportunity to develop critical views of their condition, to identify problems, and to try to find their solution."⁷⁶

Though messianism plays a particularly important role in the lives of women in Muslim societies, it must be borne in mind that the Muslims who throng the shrines of Sufis and "saints" consist not only of oppressed, repressed, or troubled women seeking solace and solutions to both internal and external problems but also men whose human needs are not being fulfilled in and by the larger society in which they live. Messianism which embodies and reflects the complexity and richness as well as the ironies and paradoxes of human life has, through the centuries, provided for Muslims—both women and men—as for many others a means of coping with reality through weaving a web of multicolored strands which spans both the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material, the eternal and the ephemeral. Though not warranted and, in fact, repudiated by qur'anic teaching, messianism has, nevertheless, exercised a very powerful and profound influence on the lives of millions of Muslims of every hue and class.

The third reflection concerns messianism in the context of the political situation that exists in most of the Muslim world today. Historically, messianism has been the repository of the passion—the anxiety, anguish, and exasperation—of those who were disinherited or discriminated against by the power structure of official Islam and has, therefore, had the emotional potential to foment revolutions. Today, in the mid-1980's, many centers of messianism are as much the burial places of revolutionary impulses as they are of "saints."

Because being powerful is an integral component of the Muslim self-image, Muslims (unlike Jews, Christians, and Hindus, for instance) have not felt the need to develop the psychological and spiritual resources required to deal constructively with powerlessness, nor have they learned, for the most part, to define power in other than temporal terms. These seem to me to be serious deficiencies in Muslim consciousness and character. Nonetheless, the inability of Muslims to accept powerlessness as their collective destiny in history and their tendency to define power in temporal terms have also had some positive effects. For instance, Muslims are impossible to enslave, as is illustrated dramatically by the resistance in Afghanistan ever since this impoverished and backward country was invaded by the U.S.S.R. It has also made the Muslim masses an ever-present source of danger to those despotic rulers who try to make them feel powerless. The overthrow of the seemingly invincible Raza Pahlawi by the Iranian people—once the

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 111.

brutality of the Shah's agents, particularly the Savak, made them conscious of their powerlessness—is a case in point.

Learning from the events of recent history, many self-serving but clever rulers and administrators of Muslim societies have sought to use messianism as an instrument of political manipulation in order to neutralize the emotions of the Muslim masses, who, being oppressed and exploited in multifarious ways, are angry and resentful and thus a threat to the status quo. Fatima Mernissi described what she perceives to be the socio-political impact of messianism on Muslim women (though many of her observations apply also to Muslim men), in this way:

[W]omen invest all of their efforts and energies in trying to get a supernatural force to influence the oppressive structure on their behalf. This does not affect the formal power structure, the outside world. . . . The saint in the sanctuary plays the role of the psychiatrist in the capitalist society, channeling discontent into the therapeutic process and thus depriving it of its potential to combat the formal power structure. Saints, then, help women adjust to the oppression of the system. The waves of resentment die at the sanctuary's threshold. Nothing leaves with the woman except her belief that her contact with the saint triggered mechanisms which are going to affect the world, change it, and make it suit her conditions better. In this sense, sanctuaries are "happenings" where women's collective energies and combative forces are invested in alienating institutions which strive to absorb them, lower their explosive effect, neutralize them. Paradoxically, the arena where popular demonstrations against oppression, injustice, and inequality are most alive become, in developing economies, the best ally of unresponsive national bureaucracies. Encouragement of traditional saints' rituals by administrative authorities who oppose any trade unionist or political movement is a well-known tactic in Third World politics.⁷⁷

A monumental mosque is being built by the government at unmentionable cost in the poverty-stricken, problem-ridden Islamic Republic of Pakistan to pay homage to 'Ali Hujwiri, the beloved Sufi "saint" (popularly known as "Data Ganj Bakhsh," the Giver of Great Treasures) whose burial-place in Lahore, my native city, is the most popular place of pilgrimage in the country. While wondering if the great "honor" being bestowed upon the scholarly seeker of God by the caretakers of this "land of the pure" would please his spirit, it dawned on me that my study of messianism in Islam, which had led me to probe the religious consciousness and experience of the masses of Muslims (including myself), had left me with more questions than answers. Gazing at the golden gate, which was the triumphal proclamation of the last "people's government" to glorify the "people's saint," and the earnest faces of the many—the mighty and the meek,

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

the high and the low—who touched the Data's shrine with prayerful hands, conflicting thoughts and feelings swept over me. I was overwhelmed by the contrast between the clarity and certainty implicit in the Word of God and the ambiguity and ambivalence inherent in the state of being human. The journey which I thought had ended had only just begun, for I realized that there was so much in the heart of God and of God's creatures that I had yet to ponder.

Finally, as one deeply interested in and committed to both intrareligious dialogue among Muslims and interreligious dialogue among believing Jews, Christians, and Muslims, I need to reflect on this article's relevance to the ecumenically minded Muslim, Jew, and Christian. Inasmuch as it is not possible to engage in authentic dialogue without exploring the complexity and profundity of that which forms the core of the consciousness of the dialogue partners, this article offers points for serious reflection on a subject—messianism—which is crucially important for understanding the inner world of Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

All ecumenically concerned people living in today's brutally and bitterly divided world, looking at the way in which believers in the one merciful and loving God are killing each other daily, know how urgent is the need for dialogue among Jews, Muslims, and Christians. As a Muslim, I am greatly disturbed and pained by the fact that it is nearly impossible to engage even a so-called "liberal" Muslim in a genuine intrareligious or interreligious dialogue, but as a Muslim I understand the reasons for this. Muslim society, in general, has not been through the Enlightenment and has not developed the objectivity necessary to dialogue about religious matters, even among its own members. The long history of conflict between the Muslims and "the people of the Book" as well as the more recent history of colonialism have not been conducive to promoting interreligious dialogue among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Recognizing these and other impediments to dialogue, I am persuaded, nevertheless, that meaningful and effective dialogue both among and with Muslims is possible, given certain conditions. One of the most important of these conditions is that the Muslim religious tradition and experience be understood as deeply and comprehensively as possible, not only from without but also from within.

I hope this article will stimulate at least a few openminded Muslims to reflect critically on the issues it raises, particularly on how they apprehend and relate to God and to reality, individually and collectively. Such reflection leads to greater self-understanding, which, in turn, brings about the self-security required for dialogue with other Muslims as well as with Jews and Christians. I also hope that at least a few equally openminded Jews and Christians will reflect critically on their own messianic ideas and beliefs to see if they can find significant parallels to messianism in Islam within their own religious traditions and experiences, which may help to deepen the sensitivity and empathy with which they look at and communicate with Muslims. Such reflection can lead to the opening of new avenues of understanding among the three religious communities—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—which, despite all their difference, share the same loving, merciful, dialogue-oriented God.

<p>"Messianism and Islam," in <i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>, Volume 22, No. 2, Spring 1985, pp. 261-291.</p>
