



University of Tehran Press

Classical and Contemporary Islamic Studies (CCIS)

Online ISSN: 3060-7337

Home Page: <https://jcis.ut.ac.ir>

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

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ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Research Article

Article History:

Received: 19 February 2025
Revised: 05 June 2025
Accepted: 15 June 2025
Published Online: 23 September 2025

Keywords:

Meaning of life,
Supra-religious messianism,
Islamic messianism,
Mahdism,
Existential meaning.

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. It also seeks 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 Imam Mahdi, and the necessity for purposeful effort and patience—can profoundly enhance the meaning of life.

Cite this article: Dehghani Arani, Z. (2026). Some Responses of Islamic Shi'i Messianism to the Challenges to the Meaning of Life. *Classical and Contemporary Islamic Studies (CCIS)*, 8 (1), 21-31.
<http://doi.org/10.22059/jcis.2025.390811.1409>



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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jcis.2025.390811.1409>

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the debate about the meaning of life is not a new topic, dating back to the discussions of philosophers as well as to 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, the issues posited by 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, encouraging diverse 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). These approaches are based on assumptions and intellectual foundations, all of which, according to Metz (2013), can be categorized into two types: supernaturalism¹ and naturalism². Meanwhile, numerous experts have proposed and examined suggestions regarding the meaning of human life, including concepts such as being valuable, happy, purposeful, and useful.³

It is natural that, by accepting religious propositions, the meaning of life becomes more similar to theistic supernaturalism (Mohammadi Monfared, 2011). However, some religious teachings can be used to suggest the significance 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 of such a belief—specifically Islamic-Shiite Mahdism—on providing meaning to life.

Some researchers have already conducted research on the topic discussed in this article, including "The Role of Mahdism in the Meaningfulness of Shi'ite Life" by Badashti (2012), "Recognizing the Components and Factors of Meaningfulness of Life in the Mahdist Rule" by Karimi (2019), "The Role of Belief in Mahdism in Giving Meaning to Individual Life" by Miftah and Mohammadi (2018), and "The Conceptual Basis of Shi'ite Salvationism on the Meaning of Divine Supernatural Life" and "The Meaning of Life, Nihilism, and the Thought of Mahdism" conducted by Mohammadi Monfared in 2011 and 2008, respectively. However, apart from the difference in the subject matter and the views of some authors, it seems that the research conducted 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, lacking specific stages and differentiations. 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 challenge to the meaning of life. Then, we will refer to the areas offered by Islamic Messianism for giving meaning to life. 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 exploratory⁴, which involves examining various aspects of belief in the Savior to identify the elements that effectively contribute to finding the meaning of life. It should be noted that in our belief, the themes that Messianism (generally or specifically) provides can help people strengthen (multiply) and reform (restore) their meanings of life, and even find new meanings for it.

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

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

4. Exploratory research is primarily concerned with discovery and generating theory.

General Messianism

Islamic Mahdism, regarding the belief in coming a savior, shares some elements with various other religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. Many of these shared elements restore and enhance the meaning of life, some of which will be discussed 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. If one does not want to follow the views of those like Schopenhauer (1969), who regard this suffering as a permanent destiny for humanity, with no solution to it, they 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; however, 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 individuals such as Moltmann (1993) base the discourse of Christianity on a “theology of hope,” identifying hope as the spirit that governs Christianity, which is offered to humanity through the teachings of the Bible, based on the divine promise, plan for the end of the world, and the planning of humanity’s movement towards that hopeful future permanently.

Coverage of a Long-Standing Human Aspiration: The Promise of an Objective Example not Only in This World but Also in the Hereafter

Many religions believe in the coming of a savior in this world, and not in a world beyond (Tawfiqī, 2005). 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 (Cohen, 1932; Rasul-zadeh & Baghbani, 2010; Tawfiqī, 2005), 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 et al., 2010). 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.¹

Its Universality and Generality Employing Subjective and Objective Explanations

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 (e.g., Frankl, 1984). The dominant view, on the other hand, posits that the meaning of life is a collective matter that pertains to the life of all mankind, and it should be conceived and considered in a general and predominant way. According to the second view, not only should the perspective of an individual or a specific group be considered; rather, what makes the lives of most people purposeful becomes the criterion for measuring the meaningfulness of life. Consequently, 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 (Mowahediyān Attar et al., 2010). Therefore, 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 of individuals have had a desirable life and enjoyed various material and spiritual opportunities, the

1. Consider, for example, Nietzsche's view on this matter (Nietzsche, 1968).

promise of an ideal collective life is highly hopeful and imparts a profound meaning to life and the effort to achieve it.

In addition to the above view, some experts, such as Wolf (1998), believe that explanations of the meaning of life should not be limited to purely subjective or objective explanations; rather, it 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 as well as subjective appeals (Wolf, 1998). 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, ultimately leading to relief and lasting peace. At the same time, these religions describe the final period of history, referred to as the "end of time" or phrases such as "apocalypse," as being full of material and spiritual hardship. However, they promise that this era will be completely transformed and will 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 states:

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, 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... (Psalm 37:1-11)

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. (Mark 13: 7-26)

It is interesting to note that the Christian interpretation of this difficult time is the period of birth pains, indicating both 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 (al-Kulaynī, 1987, vol. 1; Ibn Bābawayh, 1975, vol. 2; Ibn Kathīr, 1988, vol. 1).

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, 1990b, P. 437-438)

The question that comes to mind is why this common point is mentioned 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 here: 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 Cottingham (2003), who, referring to the importance and place of suffering in religions, describes the philosophy of justification of this matter as follows: "[This suffering] functions 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 humans to give up their attachments and come closer to

humanity” (P. 75). Obviously, this view along with the effort resulting from it have a great impact on accepting and orienting towards the 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), the spread of justice everywhere, even in people's private life (al-Nu'mānī, 1977), the equal distribution of public property, and the implementation of justice between the good and the evil (Ibn Bābawayh, 2011, vol. 1). 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 that:

In my nation, 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. (Ibn Māja Qazwīnī, 1997, Vol. 5, P. 540)

Naturally, one of humanity's long-standing aspirations is to establish justice⁴ 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 systems of atheistic schools, deniers, and polytheists will be dismantled, and only the monotheistic system will prevail on the axis of God and His religion. This is clearly stated in verse 55 of Surah An-Nur and some narrations (al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1996, vol. 5). 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).

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," can be mentioned, which presents in two volumes important references to the beliefs of Sunni and hadith scholars on the subject of Mahdism (Faḳīh Imānī, 1982). Of course, the degree of belief among the Twelver Shia sect in 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 that the Messenger of God (PBUH) stated: "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." (Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, 2014, vol. 8, P. 381)

4. Some researchers, such as Metz (2013), 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.

Human Dignity

Human dignity is an issue that has been clarified in the Holy Qur'an¹ 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*).² 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. Things that contradict human dignity, such as discrimination, open corruption, class differences, will be eliminated. The true rule of religion and morality in society will lead to the replacement of immoral behavior, such as lying, greed, self-importance, and pride, with virtues such as humility, sacrifice, and compassion.³ 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).

Inheritance of the Earth to the Oppressed and the Righteous

One of the fundamental, common beliefs among Muslims is that the weak and oppressed people⁴, as well as the religious class of society (who are usually deprived of material blessings 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 emphasized in several verses in the Qur'an.⁵ Interestingly, the Qur'an also emphasizes this divine promise in earlier holy books,⁶ with its signs evident in some of these books.⁷

Some Western scholars consider this issue, which is emphasized in various religions, to be an important reason for the meaning of human life, without which, human life would lose its meaning. For example, Cottingham (2003), 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, 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. (pp. 71-72)

In the Holy Qur'an, there are numerous reminders about the necessity of paying attention to goodness in thought and speech to benefit from life, and to some extent, it is mentioned as one of the important factors in giving meaning to life. Perhaps one of the most important points of these is the special emphasis placed in Surah Al-Asr on the losses and disadvantages of all people in the path of life. It considers only those characterized by faith, righteous deeds, guidance to the truth, and patience

1. "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)

2. In *Mafatih Al-Jinan*, 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)

3. There are many hadiths in this regard; however, only one will be mentioned: "...with it God destroys falsehood ... and with it He removes the humiliation of slavery from you..." (al-Tusi, 1999b, P. 185).

4. Regarding the meaning of "*Istiz'af*," which here is synonymous with the weak and oppressed people, see Rāghib al-Isfahānī (1984).

5. "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).

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

7. 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."

to be safe and immune from these losses (Mowahediyar Attar, 2022). Interestingly, in some Islamic hadiths, this Surah is considered to be related to the era of the Islamic Savior (Ibn Bābawayh, 1975, vol. 2).

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 its aforementioned principles addresses specific concerns and aspirations for various groups of people.

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; Reynolds, 2001). It seems that the elements inherent 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 in the following sections.

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. As long as humanity is present on the earth, the divine proof and representative must also be on the earth (Ibn Bābawayh, 1992).¹ Additionally, the Shi'ite religion proves certain characteristics for the Imam, among the most prominent of which are his infallibility and knowledge (al-Ḥillī, 2004; Rabbānī Gulpayigānī, 2012). Accepting and establishing the belief in the presence and life of an Imam who has both knowledge and infallibility has an undeniable impact both on the individual and social approach of the Shi'ite community. This is because, in the eyes of every Shi'ite, the Twelfth Imam is present with them during this period of occultation; he watches over their actions, needs, and problems and helps the Shi'ite community in various ways if 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, Shi'ites maintain 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 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, which encompasses everything that lies beyond the realm of tangible things² (Makārim Shīrāzī, 1995, vol. 1). Although the promise of the coming of a savior or an ideal era in the future of humanity (which, as mentioned earlier, is common among different religions) can be considered an example of the Unseen, Imam Mahdi (AS) is currently living in occultation. Due to the unique nature of his existence in this era, he is considered as a more significant example of the unseen.³ The profound impact of belief in unseen matters and assistance—whose existence has been substantiated by evidence—on instilling hope in human life and preventing nihilism and despair is both clear and significant.⁴

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 hope for a

1. Of course, according to Shi'ite belief, this Imam can be visible or hidden. Imam Baqir (PBUH) states that, "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).

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

4. See the article: "The Role of Belief in the Unseen in Giving Hope to Life" by Ramezani Staremi (2017).

bright future.¹ In view of the severe pressures that were exerted on the Shi'ites in various Islamic periods, often leading 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. Under the guidance of the Imams they tried to rebuild their facilities and abilities 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.²

One might think that this hope was false as 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 haste and timing (al-Kulaynī, 1987, vol. 1). 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.³ Third, the way of compensation, or more aptly, the rewards mentioned in the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) for those who strive on this long path, will alleviate concerns about not understanding the ultimate outcome.⁴

"Waiting" or "*Intizar*" is a fundamental doctrine in the Shi'ite belief system, particularly 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). 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. It places the waiting person in a state of serious anticipation, companionship, and empathy with the ideals of the Savior.⁵ 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 the waiting person (al-Kulaynī, 1987, vol. 1), as even at that time, he is practically with the Savior and aligned with his ideals. Such a perspective 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. 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) and the admonition to avoid idleness and laziness on the way to the help of the Savior (al-Tusi, 1990a) is in line with this issue, portraying 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 approach to life and its pursuit is consistent with the views of scholars such as Cottingham (2003), who believe that life can find meaning with a certain type of religious perspective.

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 light 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. This is manifested in individual aspects (such as the growth of faith and inner piety) and social aspects (such as compassion for people or confronting oppression). This approach

1. In this regard, it is sufficient to refer to the term, "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.

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

3. 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).

4. Among them is the reward of being with the Prophet at the beginning of Islam or being with Imam Mahdi in the final battle against evil, even having the status of martyrs of that era. (al-Kulaynī, 1987, vol. 1, p. 371)

5. Perhaps, Wright (2008), 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.

provides profound meaning for life and is particularly applicable to the view that the meaning of life is constructed by humans themselves, rather than discovered.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 Shi'ism, 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 (AS),³ is both hopeful and encouraging. Striving toward that ideal era fosters a profound sense of purpose.

One of the ancient beliefs, somewhat specific to the Shi'ism, is "Raj'a" or the belief in the return of certain good or bad individuals during the final period of this world (al-Mufid, 1983). There are several reasons for this belief, including the reward of the righteous and the punishment of certain criminals in this world, as well as the strengthening of hope and readiness among those waiting for the appearance of the Savior (Muhammadi Rayshahri, 2014, Vol. 1). Both of the above cases are deeply influential in making the lives of believers meaningful, as believing in Raj'a assures them that individuals who have reached the highest points of faith or the lowest levels of humanity throughout history, and who have apparently not received the reward or punishment for their actions, will return to the world. In this way, some of the efforts and good deeds of pure believers, as well as the disbelief, evil, and oppression of pure disbelievers and oppressors, will be compensated in this world. Furthermore, 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 attaining high levels of faith.

Conclusion

The meaning of life is a highly important and vital concern, especially in the current era. Various experts have spoken about different aspects such as its concept, its 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 Shi'ite 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 Shi'ite 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 Shi'ite 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. For example, the American philosopher, Irving Singer, maintains in his book that, "We speak of 'finding' a life that is meaningful, but the meaning is something we create." (Singer, 2010, pp. 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, p. 5).

3. In one version of the hadith, Imam Sadiq (PBUH) stated: "When our Qa'im rises, Allah will lay His hand on the heads of the servants, using 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 using 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 and Ja'fari (2015).

It should be mentioned that 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).

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