Waiting for the Mahdi: A path for dialogue

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When Iran president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad addressed an open letter to George W. Bush in May 2006, he invoked Judgment Day, the day when the deeds of all political leaders will be examined. Ahmadinejad asked Bush whether either of them would be accepted “in the promised world, where . . . Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) will be present.” Ahmadinejad appeared to be trying to connect with American Christians and to critique Bush in light of the U.S. president’s own faith. He expressed not only his own reverence as a Muslim for Jesus but his expectation that Jesus would return to earth.

This expectation is part of a Muslim belief in the appearance of the Mahdi—a savior who, along with Jesus, is expected to bring justice and peace to the world at the end of this age. Belief in the Mahdi plays a special role in Shi‘a Islam, a strand of Islam which includes about 15 percent of Muslims worldwide. Shi‘as predominate in Iran and account for more than half the Muslims in Iraq and Lebanon. Significant Shi‘a pockets also exist in Kuwait, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Syria, forming a Shi‘a crescent, a potential power bloc that worries many Sunni Muslims as well as Western powers.

Shi‘a Islam arose in disagreements over who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad when he died in 632. Shi‘as believe that it should have been Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and the husband of his daughter, Fatima. Ali was highly regarded for his pious character and spiritual leadership. But Muhammad was succeeded by Abu Bakr, and then by Umar and Uthman. These first three caliphs were mainly political and military rulers. As Shi‘as tell it, by 656, when Uthman died and Muslim rule extended into eastern Iran, Armenia, Syria and Egypt, upper-class Muslims had become obsessed with power and wealth. They looked down on their new subjects, even those who had become Muslim. This empire had strayed far from the simpler, more brotherly and righteous society prescribed by Muhammad.

In 656 Ali became the fourth caliph of Islam, but he was murdered in 661, and the Caliphate passed to Uthman's descendants, the Umayyads. This precipitated the most significant event in Shi'a history. In 680 Ali's son Husayn (Muhammad's grandson) and 72 of his followers were surrounded by a massive Umayyad force at Karbala, in what is now Iraq. Despite the hopeless odds, Husayn fought back, but he and his followers were killed.

According to many Shi'as, Husayn undertook his desperate battle because Muslims had strayed so far from Muhammad's teaching that only the shocking murder of his grandson would jolt them into realizing the error of their ways. Shi'as mourn Husayn's death on their most holy day, Ashoura. Their extensive weeping for his sacrifice and their prayers to obtain its atoning benefits have been compared to the rituals by which Christians mark Good Friday. But remembrance of Husayn's martyrdom also prompts vows to avenge him.

Shi'as believe that Muslims should always have had one leader who combines administrative skills and spiritual ones, as Muhammad and Ali did. Shi'as call these extraordinary persons imams. (In Sunni Islam, the term *imam* refers to a leader of a mosque.) For Shi'as, Ali was the first imam and Husayn the third.

Iranian Shi'as count 12 imams. All or most of them, according to Shi'a tradition, were murdered by powerful Muslim governments. Although Shi'as have ruled Iran since 1501, through most of their history Shi'as have been a minority group, otherwise excluded from centers of power. They believe that Allah took the 12th imam, Abu'l-Qasim Muhammad, into "occultation"—that is, Allah hid and protected him—in about 874. It is he who will reappear as the Mahdi, and Jesus will reappear with him.

Some Sunni Muslims also await a Mahdi, though they usually expect him to be a contemporary who will suddenly proclaim himself as such. Some Sunnis did so in the past and led armies against their enemies (such as Muhammad Ahmad in the Sudan, who succeeded in ending Egyptian occupation in 1881-1885). But Iranian Shi'as await someone who has long represented a people persecuted ever since Muhammad's time and who will finally vindicate them.

Since Iran is the world's leading Shi'a power, many Iranians expect that it will play a major role in preparing for the Mahdi and in his subsequent activity. This belief renders Iranian Mahdism enormously significant in global politics.

What do Iranian Shi‘as expect to happen when their Mahdi, or 12th imam, and Jesus reappear? It is impossible to give a definite answer, because Iranian Shi‘as differ among themselves. I have spoken at two large Mahdism conferences in Tehran and dialogued formally with Shi‘a leaders several times. My impression is that Iranian Mahdism could either lead toward political and military expansion or be channeled into cooperative efforts.

Iranian leaders valorize the 1979 revolution that overthrew the shah and brought Ayotollah Khomeini to power. Khomeini often invoked Shi‘a history and compared his cause with Husayn’s and the shah’s with the Umayyads, Husayn’s killers. When he took power, Khomeini executed many of his opponents. Khomeini also began exporting the Shi‘a revolution. He kindled discontent in other countries, sometimes with violent means or violent results, until Iran was exhausted by its war with Iraq (1980-1988). Iran might have lost that war had not many thousands of young people, heeding the Shi‘a call to martyrdom, stormed Iraqi forces with few weapons or none at all.

Though Iran’s recent history raises the possibility of a militant form of Islam, Mahdism can also be invoked to encourage interfaith and international dialogue. This is because Mahdism, like all eschatologies, envisions more than the conquest of evil; it envisions the coming of a just and peaceful social order and the end of poverty and suffering for all peoples. A major question is whether the future is seen as discontinuous or continuous with the preceeding history. When eschatologies stress discontinuity, they often legitimate efforts to bring about that future by violent means. When eschatologies emphasize some measure of continuity, they usually inspire people to start living by the ideals of the future in the present, and to try to realize them in their societies. One can see this element also among Iranian Shi‘as, who believe that becoming more righteous, individually and socially, is a prerequisite for the Mahdi’s coming. Many Iranians and their leaders regard this as the special task of the world’s only Shi‘a-governed nation.

Though Shi‘a Islam and Christianity both have eschatological visions, and this opens an avenue for dialogue between Iranian Shi‘as and North American Christians, one difference between Shi‘a and Christian eschatology is the central role of Shari‘a law in Mahdism. Iranians insist that the Mahdi will ensure justice for all, but in Iran today, Shari‘a law is sometimes implemented by the lash, by amputation or by hanging. Women are subjected to various restrictions (for example, all women, both residents and visitors, must wear headscarves in public).

But many interpretations of Shari‘a flourish in the Muslim world and in Iran. For example, Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who is greatly honored by many Iranians (and opposed by others), repeatedly invokes Islamic legal tradition to support women’s rights and other human rights.

Jesus’ place in Mahdism provides another matter for discussion. Jesus often appears to be the Mahdi’s second in command. The Muslims I have talked to leave Jesus’ role vague. When I asked a Shi‘a scholar how the Mahdi’s coming would affect Christians, he said that there would be no problems, since Jesus and the Mahdi will work together. I pressed on: “What if these Christians believe Jesus is divine?” Jesus, he replied, will clarify that he is not divine and that he was Muhammad’s forerunner. “What if Jesus says he is what we Christians believe?” I asked. The scholar stared and stammered; that possibility was incomprehensible—the Jesus who comes with the Mahdi will be the honored prophet, nothing more.

Following a recent conference in Tehran I spent ten days in Iran. While there I was repeatedly interviewed for radio, television and films and constantly asked for my views of Christianity and America. Many interviewers, mostly young people, kept asking questions well beyond the allotted time. Iranians seem desperate for contacts with Americans. They want to hear what we really think, and for us to hear what they really think. In view of the ominous clouds that overhang American-Iranian relations, I hope that we will continue to develop and learn from such conversations.