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AL-IMAM AL-MAHDI

THE JUST LEADER OF HUMANITY

Ayatollah Ibrahim Amini

Translated by
Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina

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Translator's Introduction

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

As I write this preface to the translation of the book on our twelfth Imam, al-Qa'im al-Mahdi (peace be upon him), it gives me enormous satisfaction for having realized the task that I undertook as a statement of my personal faith. Initially the task was personally assigned by the author of the book, Ayatollah Ibrahim Amini, during my visit to Tehran in the summer of 1993. Due to my teaching and administrative responsibilities as the Director of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Virginia, I had to wait for a more opportune time to devote my energies to this demanding responsibility. Nevertheless, Ayatollah Ibrahim Amini's request reflected not only his confidence in my ability to render this serious work on Twelver Shi'i faith accurately into English, it also conveyed his confidence in my personal faith in the twelfth Imam.

The summer of 1993 was also a time to be grateful to God for a very important reason. In the interview with the editors of *Kayhan-i Farhangi* in Qumm, I had the opportunity to explain the academic study of religion in the light of my own study about the idea of the future leadership in Islam and how it essentially differed from the method of conducting research in the traditional centers of Islamic learning. The entire interview, now available in English and French translations, is a good example of the scholarly dialogue between modern and traditional institutions of higher learning.

The translation of this important book would have been impossible without the need on my part to respond to those who have attributed to me false notions and ideas which are neither part of my personal faith nor of my academic research. At no point have I entertained, even in error, opinions that cannot be ascertained in the written primary sources of the Twelver Shi'ism. Every piece of document used to write my academic research is meticulously investigated and critically evaluated in the light of the teachings of the Qur'an and the authentic traditions of the *ahl al-bayt*. It is remarkable that Ayatollah Amini's *Dadgustar-i jihan*, which I have rendered in English under the title of: *Al-Imam al-Mahdi: The Just Leader of Humanity*, gives the believer a detailed description of the belief in the twelfth Imam, whose chronological development based on historical study of the sources I have examined in *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*. More remarkable is the fact that even when Ayatollah Amini and I have approached the subject with strikingly different method of investigation, we have reached the same conclusion regarding the belief about the Imam who will come forth from his invisible existence to take charge of the world as its just leader.

The methodological difference between the two endeavors actually points to the different readership: the former is written strictly for the educated 'insiders' (the believers); whereas, the latter is written for both the educated 'insiders' and the 'outsiders' (non-believers). This is an important distinction to keep in mind, as the readers in the community begin to fathom the contribution made by Ayatollah Amini to reach a believing audience in contrast to my own academic contribution to reach a non-believing audience for the intellectual appreciation of the Twelver Shi'ite school of thought.

My endeavors in *Islamic Messianism* were very much guided by the need to present the Shi'ite school of thought to a Western academic world dominated by an "orientalist" scholarship that not only marginalizes Shi'ism as a deviant and corrupt form of Islam, but also regards it as directly influenced by Jewish and Christian messianic ideas. It was important to challenge long held conclusions of the Western and Sunni scholars regarding the origins of Shi'i notion of the divinely guided Imam, and assert with confidence that the idea of the future coming of the Mahdi arose from the Qur'anic world view's concern with bringing to fruition a just and ethical society. On the other hand, Ayatollah Amini's endeavors in *Al-Imam al-Mahdi: The Just Leader of Humanity*, are geared towards responding to the doubts raised by the skeptic Shi'is and polemical Sunnis.

This purpose of reaching out to the specific Persian speaking Muslim audience also explains the methodology employed by him which endeavors to establish the religious truth strictly on the basis of sources dealing with *hadith*. Each argument is sought from the interpretation of the specific Qur'anic verses and *hadith*-reports used to support that interpretation. The *hadith*, then, becomes the fundamental source of religious proof. However, following the well established methods employed by our prominent scholars, the *hadith* is not accepted uncritically. It is scrutinized for its validity and its use as evidence in support of a religious belief. Moreover, Ayatollah Amini introduces rational argument to discredit some of the stories about meeting with the twelfth Imam that have been accepted uncritically by some scholars of *hadith*. Thus, for instance, the well known story about the 'Evergreen Island' being the residence of the twelfth Imam is rejected by him not only as being contradictory in the details provided by the narrator; it is also regarded as a mere fabrication. Furthermore, modern research on aging and longevity is cited extensively from Western sources to establish the fact that science does not regard it inconceivable for the twelfth Imam (peace be upon him) to have been blessed with a long age.

The most enlightening and eye opening section of the book deals with the question of the achievements of the twelfth Imam when he appears (Chapter 14 of the translation). Here the information regarding the 'The Freshness of the Explanations offered by the Mahdi,' covers a critical assessment of how we, as the followers of the twelfth Imam, have ignored the true meaning of Islam in our lives and have attached importance to the rituals without realizing the true moral and ethical content of these religious devotions.

Thus, Ayatollah Amini writes:

