

The Necessity of Adopting, Demonstrating, and Promoting the Mahdawī Identity

AYATOLLAH SAYYID AḤMAD AL-ASHKIWARĪ

Paper Presented at the Muslim Convention 2022

FULL PAPER

IN THIS PAPER

An Abstract	3
Introduction: Human Nature and Discovery of Profound Human and Religious Concepts	4
The Mahdawī Shiʿī Identity: The Imam, the System, the Individual, and the Nation	5
What are the pillars of the Mahdawī identity?.....	5
What are the characteristics of the Mahdawī culture?	7
What are the characteristics of followers of the Mahdī (a)?	7
Answering a misconception.....	8
What are the rituals associated with the Mahdī worldview?.....	9
What is the benefit of an absent imam?.....	10
Who was the founder of the Mahdawī idea?.....	11
What does this identity entail?.....	11
What is the crisis of Mahdawī Identity?.....	12
The crisis of culture calls for a crisis of identity.	13
Reading heritage with excessive, negligent, or deficient methods.	13
How do we respond to misconceptions?.....	13
How do we fortify this identity?	15
Misconceptions and Responses	15

AN ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper can be stated in several points which represent the objectives and results that follow from adopting, demonstrating, and promoting the Mahdawī identity.

First, remembrance and insight. It is important to remind the Shiite community of the components of its identity specific to the Mahdī worldview and making it aware of the dangers that beset this identity. It teaches the community that there is no way out from its intellectual ordeal except by knowing this profound identity in a deep and appropriate manner.

Second, identifying and achieving goals. Success in achieving the community's goals depends on this in-depth knowledge of the Mahdī worldview and identity, because it is what determines the community's goals, duties, and values, as well as defines its characteristics and advantages.

Third, the formation of reality. Identity links experienced reality and desired truth. It creates a longing for reality to conform to the truth and truth to become reality.

Fourth, defining symbols. Symbols are defined through identity. No society of any kind is devoid of a symbol whose existence constitutes the realization of values. Such a symbol is pivotal to a society's existence. A society, through all of its members, must turn its attention to this symbol as the guide and mark by which its trajectory is defined. Symbolism is an essential value with implications, including building a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Fifth, civilizational convergence at the end of times. Conceptualization of the precise project under the title of "civilizational convergence" and presenting it as a desired objective of human civilization. The end of times will be marked by unity, achieving justice, happiness, and peace. This project is associated with the essential visions of human civilization.

INTRODUCTION: HUMAN NATURE AND DISCOVERY OF PROFOUND HUMAN AND RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS

Mankind, by its cognitive nature, does not understand the depth of a concept until it is embodied in some physical form. For example, knowledge is a human value that is not understood outside of a knowledgeable person or scholar. Piety is a religious value that is understood through concrete examples. Therefore, the relationship between values and persons is like the relationship of theory and practice. We do not fully comprehend concepts unless they are manifested in tangibly. The same is true for mercy, power, justice, freedom, tolerance, and love.

Imam al-Mahdī represents the practical application of religious and human values through his attributes – he is the promised, the faithful, the awaited saviour, the Mahdī, the reformer, the argument, the proof, and the hope.

Hence, the public sees the Imam as a symbol and manifestation of absolute values. They see him as the most complete manifestation of desired goals. He represents the vision of the prophets and saints, their legacy, the light of the progeny of Muḥammad (s), and the promise and covenant of God Almighty.

THE MAHDAWĪ SHĪ‘Ī IDENTITY: THE IMAM, THE SYSTEM, THE INDIVIDUAL, AND THE NATION

Before proceeding, we must tackle the following points:

Defining Identity. Identity in its abstract meaning is a set of characteristics by which the self is distinguished from others. It encompasses the intellectual, spiritual and emotional features that distinguish this individual from the other.

Assertions, fixed foundations, and intellectual and doctrinal premises must be characterized by vitality, attraction, and modernity. They do not come haphazardly. Rather, they must be the product of precise epistemic and scientific foundations. These must be consistent with the civilized dimension of humanity. Rather, they should allow for civilization to be achieved, and they must be applicable therein. Through this, goals and objectives are determined. Moreover, identity also encompasses the necessity of intellectual awareness, emotional connection, emphasizing the motto of “tawallī and tabarrī.” It highlights the need to protect one’s identity and a sense of pride and belonging that comes with it. It should also control the degree of openness with others in accordance to scientific and religious guidelines.

Pillars of Identity. Identity in general has several pillars, ranging from the intellectual, to the behavioural, to the spiritual. It encompasses beliefs, values, ethics, and behaviours.

WHAT ARE THE PILLARS OF THE MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY?

We can express these pillars in reference to the special characteristics of the Mahdī (a). He is a symbol, leader, example, role model, and guardian having both *Wilāyah Takwīniyyah* and *Wilāyah Tashrī‘iyyah*.

To provide further detail, let us list some of the most relevant details about Imam Mahdī (a).

THE NECESSITY OF ADOPTING,
DEMONSTRATING, AND PROMOTING THE
MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY

Ayatollah Sayyid Ahmad Al-Ashkiwari

1. The Mahdī is the saviour from the offspring of the Prophet Muḥammad (s), from the sons of Fāṭimah, and from the sons of Imam al-Ḥusayn.
2. He was born in the city of Samarra in the year 222 AH, and the certitude of his actual existence and the necessity of his survival are beyond doubt for any Twelver Shī'ī Muslim.
3. He has two occultations (*ghaybah*).
4. He is God's proof who has been preserved for the establishment of justice, the realization of truth, and the repelling of injustice from the people.
5. He appears to people after the signs are realized. His physical appearance will be that of a strong young man, even though he is old.
6. His occultation is the occultation of identity, not occultation of self. He is not absent from our lives.
7. His attributes are like the characteristics of the prophets and the imams.
8. The occultation of the Imam (a) is for a divine wisdom, and the narrations have mentioned that in detail.
9. He has the ability to drive and draw back. In other words, Imam al-Mahdī (a) has the ability to move the nation and the individual, as well as the ability to hold them and restrict their movement.
10. His influence on the world of existence is known. His life is a social one, not a personal one. The necessity of *Wilāyah Takwīniyyah* for the Mahdī worldview is a firm and clear concept in our theology.
11. The Mahdawī identity is characterized by a precautionary trait and takes the character of opposition. The environment in which the Mahdī worldview was born is an environment that was opposed to authority and defensive, due to what the reality which the Shia experienced – especially at times of repression, discrimination, and efforts to eradicate its cultural identity.
12. The Imam (a) is the possessor of absolute knowledge, absolute power, absolute will, the “Fulfilled Word,” and vast mercy – of course, with attention to the fact that his perfections are finite and fixed. They are attained through his exercise of control over himself and the brilliance of his insight. He possesses *Wilāyah Takwīniyyah*

THE NECESSITY OF ADOPTING, DEMONSTRATING, AND PROMOTING THE MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY

Ayatollah Sayyid Ahmad Al-Ashkiwari

through emanation as a dependant being. This is the precedent of prophets, many of whom had occultations and a long life, and were given wisdom at a young age.

13. He had written and signed letters.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAHDAWĪ CULTURE?

The Mahdī worldview is not just an idea, a hope, a sub-identity, a hypothesis, or a superstitious and illusory idea. It is not only a human ambition. It is not a mere foretelling of the unseen future.

The Mahdī worldview is rational, unseen, cosmic, creational, a fixed.

It is an integrated and balanced ideological, devotional, social, cultural, and emotional system with an epistemological approach that matches the goals and objectives of the final Imamate, with a positive and optimistic view of the future of the world.

It is part of our innate nature, which compels us to aspire towards a universal saviour.

It is a divine truth that is called for by our innate nature, affirmed by reason, and confirmed by religion in the Qur'an and narrations.

Its results are as follows:

1. The administration of justice.
2. The provision of security.
3. The excellence of humanity in its rational and ethical dimensions.
4. The opening of the doors of knowledge.
5. The abolishment of sin and disobedience.
6. The height of religious excellence.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FOLLOWERS OF THE MAHDI (A)?

Adopters of the Mahdī worldview have several characteristics, the most important of which are:

THE NECESSITY OF ADOPTING, DEMONSTRATING, AND PROMOTING THE MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY

Ayatollah Sayyid Ahmad Al-Ashkiwari

1. The doctrine of hope; hope in their lifetimes and hope for the future.
2. The Quran and sunnah are the guides for thought, spirit, and behaviour.
3. Waiting. Adopters of the Mahdī worldview wait as active members of society working towards reform and striving for excellence. They do not wait in their hermitages. They wait as they strive in the fields of knowledge and science, not wallowing in ignorance and superstition. The Awaited Mahdī (a) is an energetic personality. He is not lazy.
4. Striving to build a society of justice and preparation of the tools, numbers, and preludes to his public appearance.
5. Being principled and having moral commitment.
6. Courage in the face of the corrupt.
7. Precaution of misuse of the Mahdawī culture.
8. Supporting Imam Mahdī (a).
9. Doctrinal, legislative, and emotional connection (through the tongue, the heart, and physical acts).
10. Carrying the Mahdī worldview as a message and a responsibility that must convey to people (through teaching and guidance).
11. Pride in and support of the Mahdī (a) (being proud and dignified).
12. The realization that our identity is the most honourable, most precious, and most sublime identity. God Almighty says, “Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam as your religion.” (The Holy Quran, 5:3).
13. The Mahdī worldview has not changed over time. Rather, our depth of understanding it has increased.

Answering a misconception

Some misconceptions have arisen from the misunderstanding that the idea of the Mahdī (a) began with the following claims: That Imam al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarī (a) had a son. That this son disappeared. And that this son is the Mahdī (a) who had personal representatives then entered into a major occultation.

However, the Mahdī worldview and the occultation are deeply rooted ideas. It is not correct to say that they are newer ideas that occurred at that point in history. These concepts emerged due to the large number of ḥadīth regarding this from the Imams (a). Moreover, there were several imposters that claimed the title of Mahdī in the times of the previous Imams (a).

WHAT ARE THE RITUALS ASSOCIATED WITH THE MAHDĪ WORLDVIEW?

One cannot attempt to understand rituals away from the root of identity. Such an attempt makes it a superficial understanding and takes it out of the framework of correct analysis.

Rituals are the signs of devotion that God commanded to be glorified. They are the refuge and protection, as protecting believers' identity comes through strengthening the first lines of defence, which are rituals.

The major rituals associated with the Mahdī worldview are as follows:

1. Celebrating his “Coronation Day” on the 9th of Rabi‘ al-Awwal.
2. Celebrating and venerating the day of his birth on the 15th of Sha‘bān.
3. Standing up when his name is mentioned.
4. Continuing the culture of naming new-borns after him.
5. Reciting the supplications for hastening his public appearance (such as Du‘ā’ al-Iftitāḥ, Du‘ā’ al-Nudbah, Du‘ā’ al-‘Ahd, Du‘ā’ al-Faraj, and Ziyārat Āl Yāsīn).
6. Being ready and on the look out for the signs of the coming of his public appearance.
7. Seeking comfort in him, reciting his visitations, and seeking his help in times of distress.
8. Introducing the world to the Mahdī worldview, his renaissance, his knowledge system, and his goals, as well as addressing misconceptions about him such as the improbability of his existence.
9. Visiting the shrine of Imam al-Mahdī (a) and Masjid al-Sahlah.
10. A culture of waiting and hope.

THE NECESSITY OF ADOPTING, DEMONSTRATING, AND PROMOTING THE MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY

Ayatollah Sayyid Ahmad Al-Ashkiwari

In addition, there are several principles that are foundational to the Mahdī worldview.

1. The necessity of believing in the unseen.
2. The necessity of believing in the attributes of God Almighty, the necessity of sending messengers, and the principles of divine grace, justice, and wisdom.
3. The necessity of believing in the Imamate and that it is a status appointed by God Almighty.
4. The necessity of understanding the reality of the creation of the universe and the purpose of creation (creating the universe and creating humanity).
5. The necessity of studying divine traditions in human societies.
6. The necessity of the presence of the Imam (a) at all times, and he is the heart of the universe. As the narrations explicitly state, the earth is never to be devoid of an argument for God, whether it is apparent and well-known, or absent and hidden.
7. Ponderance on the narrations relevant to this study.
8. Trials and tribulations as a means for instilling morals. This can be inferred with rational and religious evidence.

God says, “O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah, and be with the Truthful.” (The Holy Quran, 9:119).

Likewise, *ḥadīth al-thaqalayn* indicates the presence of the “two weighty things” in every age. The Prophet (s) also said, “He who dies without knowing the Imam of his time dies the death of the Age of Ignorance.”

What is the benefit of an absent imam?

The answer is that so long as the evidence proves his existence, there is no point in asking about the benefits. It is a metaphysical matter that is linked to the laws and wisdom of God Almighty.

In addition, his existence does in fact have numerous benefits. This includes testing Muslims and the vitality and impact of hope in preserving the religion even for reasons hidden to us.

- The Mahdī worldview is a formative issue, not a purely legislative one.

THE NECESSITY OF ADOPTING, DEMONSTRATING, AND PROMOTING THE MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY

Ayatollah Sayyid Ahmad Al-Ashkiwari

- The Mahdī worldview is a cosmic and existential issue.
- It is an issue stemming from the unseen.
- It is a central issue and it must be believed as a matter of doctrine.

The perfect human still exists in the universe. The perfect human was in existence at all times. He possesses *Wilāyah Takwīniyyah*.

This is a firm belief based on religious texts, theological foundations, scientific rules, and a sound approach.

WHO WAS THE FOUNDER OF THE MAHDAWĪ IDEA?

The Mahdī worldview is a divine reality, not a worldly idea created by humans. It is one of the most important of universal concepts, and one which religion has given special attention to. It is an evident, precise, clear, detailed, integrated, and harmonious thesis that represents truth, authenticity, and historical depth.

The idea was present in divine scriptures, human instinct, and ancient philosophy. It carries the inevitability of historical traditions. The Mahdī worldview is based on religious prophecies that have always been emphasized by religious leaders and texts throughout history.

Some may say that the Mahdī worldview and belief in the occultation arose from the claims of the four ambassadors or Lady Ḥakīmah.

No. It is a concrete concept established before the death of Imam al-‘Askarī (a). The Mahdī worldview did not arise out of any embarrassment that occurred after the passing of Imam al-‘Askarī (a).

The best evidence of this can be gleaned from the claims of some, such as the Kaysāniyyah, the Hanafi school, and Nawusiyyah. Their claims indicate that these claimants are attempting to exploit a concrete reality and a firm belief.

The Mahdī worldview is not an idea fabricated by the Shia. Nor are the narrations of occultation developed in later ages.

WHAT DOES THIS IDENTITY ENTAIL?

1. The Mahdī worldview is broader and more complete than the idea of the universal saviour advocated by the human nature and

THE NECESSITY OF ADOPTING, DEMONSTRATING, AND PROMOTING THE MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY

Ayatollah Sayyid Ahmad Al-Ashkiwari

previous religions. There is no subordination to previous monotheistic religions in this regard.

2. The divine promise must be fulfilled, even if it is delayed.
3. Rejecting the idea that Prophet 'Isā is the Mahdī.
4. The Mahdī worldview as adopted by the Shia is divine and public, not manmade and personal. It does not advocate silent hopes to calm people's anxieties. The claim that this idea is not divine, but a result of injustice and political persecution, is false.
5. This worldview does not call for reform amongst Muslims only, but global reform.
6. It motivates believers to develop their abilities and competences.
7. Differences in some details – due to different narrations or understanding – do not make it a controversial and sectarian issue.
8. The occultation of the Imam (a) is not through the absence of his person, as was the case with Prophet 'Isā whose occultation was miraculous and unnatural. Imam Mahdī's (a) occultation is natural through changing of names, places, and methods of communication. Otherwise, if it was a miraculous occultation, we would not need to pray for him. Yes, it can be said that he is present in our world, but no one sees him.
9. It is possible to obtain Guidance though Command from the Imam (a). God says, "We made them imams guiding by Our command." (The Holy Quran, 21:73). This comes with its condition. God says, "Those who strive in Our way, We will guide them to Our paths." (The Holy Quran, 29:69). The Imam is the path, as mentioned in Du'ā' al-Nudbah, "So they were the way to you and the path to your pleasure."

WHAT IS THE CRISIS OF MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY?

An identity crisis can be the result of a lack of firm belief, lack of familiarity with evidence, superficial understandings, a polluted environment, lack of defenders, fraud, belittling, fanaticism, and stubbornness.

The crisis of culture calls for a crisis of identity.

By culture we mean a value system. The crisis of culture may stem from the problem of changing standards or giving preference to desires over principles.

Humanity needs a criterion and allowing this to be a compass to guide towards an end goal. The Mahdī worldview, even in a time of occultation, provides the criterion and compass.

Reading heritage with excessive, negligent, or deficient methods.

Some instances of such false readings include:

1. Doubting his birth, his survival, or his existence in this world, based on a misunderstanding of our heritage, or the establishment of a method that prevents access to truth and acceptance of that.
2. Doubting that he is influential in our lives and believing that he is a restricted and ineffectual, making him out to be an Imam who has no role in our identity because he is absent.
3. Doubting his effect on the universe and existence, and believing that he does not possess any creational or legislative influence.
4. Doubting his witnessing of our actions, and believing that he is not a divine argument against us.
5. Doubting that the matters of creation are presented to him.
6. Not believing that he is caring for us.
7. Not preparing oneself for the requirements of his appearance.

How do we respond to misconceptions?

MISCONCEPTIONS SURROUNDING THE BIRTH OF IMAM MAHDĪ (A).

The following evidence can aid in responding to this misconception:

1. *Hadīth al-thaqalayn.*

THE NECESSITY OF ADOPTING, DEMONSTRATING, AND PROMOTING THE MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY

Ayatollah Sayyid Ahmad Al-Ashkiwari

2. Traditions indicating that the earth shall never be without a divine argument.
3. The verbal appointments of the Twelve Imams, and that Imam al-Mahdī (a) is the Imam after his father.
4. The ḥadīth relayed by Lady Ḥakīmah.
5. The fact that some narrators, including some of the representatives of Imam al-‘Askarī (a), saw him.
6. The fact that he prepared Imam al-‘Askarī’s (a) blessed body and praying over him before his burial.
7. The accounts of him receiving some delegations after his father's passing, and informing one of those delegations of the contents of their purse.
8. The events of the minor occultation and the signed letters which he authored.

MISCONCEPTIONS SURROUNDING THE LONG LIFE OF IMAM MAHDĪ (A).

The following evidence can aid in responding to this misconception:

1. Reason does not contradict or deny the Imam's (a) long life.
2. There are accounts that indicate his longevity.
3. There is precedence for such a long life, such as that of al-Khiḍr.

MISCONCEPTIONS SURROUNDING THE WISDOM BEHIND IMAM MAHDĪ'S (A) OCCULTATION.

The following evidence can aid in responding to this misconception:

1. There is no rational or religious law that states that every imperceptible matter is useless.
2. Suspicion stems from the lack of sensory experience, which is not the only source of knowledge.
3. There are narrations that addressed the problem and provided the answer.

MISCONCEPTIONS SURROUNDING FALSE CLAIMS OF TITLES SUCH AS AL-YAMĀNĪ, ETC.

The following evidence can aid in responding to this misconception:

1. Concrete facts are not changed by the allegations of deviants.

2. Such titles are recorded in traditions along with context in a way that reveals the deception of these claimants.

HOW DO WE FORTIFY THIS IDENTITY?

The following can aid in fortifying a Mahdawī identity:

1. Responding to misconceptions.
2. Establishing a methodological approach to illuminate the truthfulness of the idea.
3. Behavioural correlation.

Misconceptions and Responses

First Misconception: the occultation contradicts the principle of divine grace which necessitates the existence of an imam in the first place. This principle calls for numerous imams across places and times. That conclusion is false, and so is the premise.

Answer: Absence does not negate wisdom. Some prophets had occultations. For example, Mūsā was born and God concealed his birth from the people. Prophet Mūsā again went into occultation when he left the city, fearful and vigilant. Likewise is the absence of Yūsuf when he spent many years in prison. The same is true of al-Khiḍr.

Does the absence of prophets and saints contradict the rational evidence that they must be sent?

No. Rather, it may be argued that occultation is a form of grace. Whatever it is, grace does not require appearance at all, because interests change with the change of circumstances.

The origin of this misconception lies in the confusion between the necessity of the Imam's existence and our duty towards him (which is a requirement of the principle of grace) and the presence of the Imam's person (since with his appearance we know his presence is a necessity). However, grace continues to flow, even in absence. This is supported by the signed letter of Imam Mahdi (a), which states, "We do not neglect caring for you, nor do we forget you. Rather, if it were not for this [occultation], you would have been met by distress you're your enemies would surround you." And so on.

THE NECESSITY OF ADOPTING, DEMONSTRATING, AND PROMOTING THE MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY

Ayatollah Sayyid Ahmad Al-Ashkiwari

As for the second part of this misconception (that the principle of grace requires numerous imams) it is undermined by the universality of Prophet Muḥammad's (s) message. Divine grace does not necessitate multiple Ḥajj pilgrimages in different places and time. Of course, the necessity of an immaculate imam's existence throughout time is proven by religious evidence.

Second Misconception: the Prophet's (s) lack of success in his call and to establish justice must be because of one of three reasons: his inability, God's betrayal of him, or the incompleteness of the message or its delivery.

Answer: the absence of the factors that lead to success do not require slander. Perhaps there was an impediment or the conditions of success could not have been met until after a time.

Third Misconception: the Shia were perplexed after the passing of Imam al-'Askarī (a). Al-Nu'mānī said, "The masses say, 'Where is he amongst creation? When will this be and how long will he be absent? How much longer will this person live? It has more than eighty years already. Some of them say that he is dead. Some deny that he was born in the first place... Some of them think his lifespan is improbable and that the period is too long.'"

Answer: the matter of Imamate was always clear for the Shia. They always asked the current Imam about the identity of the next Imam, so that they would follow him. Moreover, the matter of occultation was known to many, but questions arose about the occultation's nature.

Perhaps the narrations of the Ahl al-Bayt concerning occultation were not known to some of the Shia. The scholars of the school of thought took on the responsibility to clarify the matter. They explained that the absent imam is like the present, even if his life is long and he is absent from sight. It is a trial and tribulation to be endured. As one tradition reported: "When Mūsā set out to for his appointment with his Lord, he promised his people to return in thirty days. When God added another ten days to the thirty, they said, 'Mūsā has abandoned us!' Thus, they did what they did."

Fourth Misconception: the story of the birth of the Mahdī (a), whose origin is Lady Ḥakīmah, and only this woman knew of his absence.

Answer:

1. We do not accept the claim that believing in the existence of Imam Mahdī (a) relies solely on the narrations of his birth. Rather, rational evidence is adequate to prove his existence.

THE NECESSITY OF ADOPTING,
DEMONSTRATING, AND PROMOTING THE
MAHDAWĪ IDENTITY

Ayatollah Sayyid Ahmad Al-Ashkiwari

2. Theologians recount the narrations on the birth of the Imam (a), which are 31 narrations.
3. Evidence for the Imam's (a) presence is not limited to the accounts of his birth, how he was born, and what occurred at that time.
4. The abundance of ḥadīth (to the extent of *tawātur*) on the existence of Imam Mahdī (a) in different contexts. Narrations mention that he is from the lineage of Imam Zayn al-Ābidīn (a), that he is the son of Imam al-ʿAskarī (a), that he has a long occultation, that he will live a long life, that he is the twelfth Imam (a) of the progeny of Muḥammad (s), that he is the ninth of the descendants of Imam Ḥussayn (a), and so on...