

THE SECOND OF TWO VOLUMES

**THIRD INTERNATIONAL
SYMPOSIUM ON
BEDIUZZAMAN
SAID NURSI**

**THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ISLAMIC
THOUGHT IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
AND BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI**

**24th-26th September, 1995
Istanbul**

ISBN 975-432-075-6

Translated from the Turkish
by Şükran Vahide

Copyright © 1997 by Sözler Neşriyat Ticaret ve Sanayi A.Ş.
All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced by any means in whole or
in part without the publisher's prior permission.
For information, address:
Sözler Neşriyat A.Ş., Nuruosmaniye Cad., Sorkun Han No: 28/2,
Cağaloğlu, İstanbul, Turkey.
Tel: 0212 - 527 76 07
Fax: 0212 - 520 82 31
E Mail: sozler@ihlas.net.tr

Printed at: Sözler Ofset A.Ş., İstanbul, 1997.

The Mahdi Question According to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

Zeki Sarıtoprak

Introduction

The famous Muslim historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun said: "To be anxious about the future is one of the characteristics of human nature," and that it was natural for man to wonder how much longer the world would exist and try to find out.¹ People have always searched for a 'saviour' in difficult and distressing times. Sometimes an unknown person has been looked upon as saviour, and sometimes a leader, or a learned man. In this way, men have forgotten their troubles, if only a little, and found solace.

The expectation of a 'saviour' is not only to be found in Judaism and Christianity, but in just about all religions and cultures, and is a belief, hope, and ideal of deliverance shared by all humanity. In Islamic belief too there is a concept of a 'saviour,' which attracts our attention through his different names. Names such as *Imam*,² *Mujaddid*,³ *Khalifa*,⁴ and *Mahdi*⁵ have been given this person —or

Assistant-Doçent Dr. ZEKİ SARİTOPRAK

Dr. Zeki Sarıtoprak was born in Batman in 1958, and attended local primary and secondary schools. He graduated in 1978 from Adana-Osmaniye Imam-Hatip High School, and in 1983 from the Theology Faculty in Marmara University. He continued his studies in the same university, receiving his Ph.D. in 1991. He spent three years in Egypt while studying for his Ph.D., and was then appointed to the Theology Faculty in Harran University, Urfa. Dr. Sarıtoprak has published various articles, contributing a number to the TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi. Among his other published works are: *Suffe Ashabı* (1985); *Sahabiler Ansiklopedisi* (with others, 1989); *İslamî Tefekkür* (Reflective Thought in Islam); *İslâma ve Diğer Dinlere Göre Decal* (The Antichrist According to Islam and Other Religions) (1992); *Sıfatı Eşrati's-Sâa* (The Signs of the End of the World) (1995); *İslam İnancı Açısından Nüzûl-u İsa Meselesi* (The Second Coming of Jesus According to Islamic Belief).

1. Ibn Khaldûn, *al-Muqaddima*, Cairo, 'Abd al-Wahid al-Wafî 1981, ii, 821.

2. Bukhârî, Abû 'Abdillâh Muḥammad b. İsmâ'il, *al-Jâmi' al-Şâhiḥ*, Beirut n.d., al-Anbiyâ, 49.

3. Abû Dâ'ûd, Sulaymân b. al-Ash'ath al-Sijistânî, *Sunan Abî Dâ'ûd*, Beirut, Muḥammad 'Abd al-Hamid n.d., al-Malâhim, 1.

unknown saviour—who is to save society from oppression and establish justice, his most important characteristic. Their roles are the same, but their persons are different. According to this belief, the Mahdi whom the Shi'a await will clash at the end of time with the Sufyan, whom the Umayyads expected. The shared aspect of all these concepts is that a person will appear at the end of time who will possess spiritual power and lead a reform movement. Here, of these names whose persons are different but functions the same, we shall discuss the Mahdi question, and attempt to define Bediuzzaman's view of the matter.

1. Etymology

The dictionary meaning of 'mahdi' is someone who is on the straight path or who has attained to guidance. *Mahdi* is someone to whom God has communicated the truth.⁶ In this respect, all Muslims who are on the right path may be called *mahdi*. However, if preceded by the definite article 'al', it becomes a particular title, used for the person whom God's Messenger (PBUH) foretold would come at the end of time. As is understood from narrations, this person will appear at a time oppression and injustice are rife, and fill the face of the earth with justice. In its plural form *mahdiyyūn*, it was used for the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs and those who followed their way. The possible reason for the person who is to come at the end of time being called the Mahdi may be a Hadith narrated from 'Ali b. Abi Talib. This narration says that in one night Almighty God will impart guidance in the full meaning to the Mahdi.⁷ The Mahdi's guidance will be God-given (*vehbi*), and he will receive it through special grace.⁸

The statement of some interpreters that the word has been misused, and that originally it was in the form of the active participle, *muhdī* (giving guidance, showing the way), is without basis.⁹

The Hanbali scholar al-Safarini (d. 1188/1774) gave a subjective explanation for the Mahdi being given this name. He said the Mahdi had attained to guidance through some hidden knowledge. He had retreated to a mountain in Syria. When the time comes he will publish from there the true Torah and Gospels, silence the Jews and Christians with them, and through them a community of Christians will become Muslim.¹⁰

4. Muslim, Abu'l-Ḥusayn b. Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Cairo 1374/1974, al-Fitan, 67-9.

5. *Abū Dā'ūd*, al-Mahdī, 1.

6. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, art. h-d-y.

7. Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad*, Cairo 1313, i, 84.

8. Ḥajjāj, 'Abdullāh, *'Alāmāt al-Qiyāmat al-Kubrā*, Cairo 1986, 73.

9. See, Macdonald, D. B., "Mahdi," *IA*, vii, 474; Goldziher says that in our times the word 'Mahdi' has been used for those who are 'muhtadi,' that is, have entered Islam from another religion, and as evidence for this points out two persons called 'Mahdi' who were originally Copts and then became Muslim and were later appointed Shaykh of al-Azhar, one 1812-1815, and the other 1870-1890. For there are numerous worthy persons in the various departments of al-Azhar, called Mahdi, who are Muslim. For the Shaykhs of al-Azhar and their names, see, *al-Azhar, Ta'rikhuhi wa Ta'awwuruhi*, Cairo 1403/1983, 161-4.

10. al-Safarini, Muḥammad b. Ahmad al-Hanbalī, *Lawāmi' al-Anwār al-Bahiyya*, Cairo 1323, ii, 72.

II. The Mahdi concept in history

In history, Abraham (PUH), the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs, Husayn, Sulayman b. 'Abd al-Malik, Hisham b. 'Abd al-Malik, and some of the 'Abbasid Caliphs were called the Mahdi. 'Ali b. Abi Talib in particular was called both Hadi and Mahdi.¹¹ Those who called 'Umar b. al-'Aziz the Mahdi also attributed some Hadiths to him.¹² God's Messenger (PBUH) himself used the terms 'the Mahdis' in reference to the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs: "I urge you to adhere to my Sunna and take the path of my well-directed and well-guided (*mahdi*) Caliphs (*khalifa*)."¹³ The fact that God's Messenger (PBUH) used it for the Caliphs shows that the term is not specific to one person.

However, the concept of 'the awaited Mahdi' must have come from Hadiths, for numerous people claimed to be the Mahdi. The first to exploit the idea was 'Ali's freed slave Kaysan, who claimed that 'Ali's younger son Muhammad b. Hanafiyya had not died, and that he had concealed himself in Mount Ridwan and one day would reappear to establish justice. Mukhtar al-Saqafi exploited the idea for his own ends. But Muhammad b. Hanafiyya had died in Medina in 81H, and his funeral prayers had been performed at that time led by Aban, the son of 'Uthman, who was then Governor of Medina.¹⁴ In 128H Harith b. Shurayj said he was the expected Mahdi, but he was unable to make anyone believe it. It is recorded that he fabricated a Hadith saying "A saviour called Harith will appear."¹⁵ Various people have claimed to be the Mahdi driven by either ambition for rank and fame, or self-interest, or nationalist feelings. But unfortunately they have been the cause of unrest in Muslim society.

Some representatives of the Mahdi movement who have appeared and gathered the masses around them are the Indian Mahdi, Sayyid Muhammad (d. 910/1504); the Maghrib Mahdi, 'Abdullah b. Tumart (d. 524/1103); Mirza Ghulam Ahmad al-Qadiyani, who appeared in India and supported the British; the Sudan Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad (d. 1303/1885), who fought the British invasion forces and defeated them; the Somali Mahdi, Muhammad b. 'Abdillah Hasan (1339/1920), who appeared after returning from the Hajj and fought the British and Italians; and Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the American Black Muslims.¹⁶ Another of those believed to the Mahdi was al-Sayyid Muhammad al-Sanusi, a descendant of the Prophet (PBUH).

There appear to have been *mahdis* who exploited belief in the Mahdi and broke the unity of the Islamic world. One should distinguish between frauds who

11. Ahmad Amin, *Ḍuḥa'l-Islām*, Beirut n.d., iii, 236; *al-Mahdi wa'l-Mahdawiyya*, Cairo 1953, 39; Goldziher, Ignaz, *al-Aqida wa'l-Sharī'a* [Arabic trans: Muhammad Yūsuf Mūsā and others], Cairo 1336/1946, 342; Ibn Athīr, *Usd al-Ghāba Fi Ma'rifa al-Ṣaḥāba*, Cairo n.d., iv, 31.

12. Nu'aym b. al-Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, Süleyman Atuf Efendi ktp. no: 602, vrq., 53a.

13. Tirmidhī, al-'Ilm, 16; Ibn Māja, al-Muqaddima, 6; *Aḥū Dā'ūd*, al-Sunna, 5.

14. Ahmad Amin, *Ḍuḥa'l-Islām*, iii, 237; Uludağ, Süleyman, *İslam'da İnanç Kurulları*, 435.

15. Sa'd Muhammad Hasan, *al-Mahdiyya fi'l-Islām Munah Aqdam al-'Uṣūr Hatta'l-Yawm*, Cairo 1953/1973, 183-4.

16. See, Sa'd Muhammad Hasan, *al-Mahdiyya fi'l-Islām*, 81-273; Ahmad Amin, *al-Mahdi wa'l-Mahdawiyya*, 63, 72, 78-9, 80, 82, 84.

have proclaimed themselves the Mahdi and holy persons who lived lives of worship and piety, making no such claims. Even if out of their excessively good opinions of them, their followers have called them the Mahdi, they themselves have on the whole not accepted this. The first is fraudulent, while the second makes no such claim. Since this is so, those who attack the Mahdi question should make the distinction. False Mahdis have caused strife and division in the Islamic world. While Western orientalists have prepared the works of some of those who claimed to be *mahdis* for publication.¹⁷

It is a fact that some of those known as the Mahdi have been beneficial to their countries and peoples. We see, for instance, that the Mahdi movements in African countries like Sudan and Somalia liberated their countries from enemy occupation by their supreme efforts against the colonialist forces. Positive benefits have therefore been secured. On the other hand, however, the Qadiyani movement endeavoured to induce the Indian Muslims to adopt an altogether passive stance towards British imperialism.

III. The Mahdi question in the Qur'an and Sunna

Before examining Bediuzzaman's view of the Mahdi question, we have to ascertain whether or not the subject has any place in the Qur'an and Sunna.

Mahdi is not mentioned in the Qur'an as the title of a person expected at the end of time. However, numerous reformers are mentioned. If we see the Mahdi as a symbol of reform, we cannot say that it is not in the Qur'an. Persons and groups are mentioned who will save people from strife and bring light to societies in periods of darkness. The word *muhtadi*, which has the same meaning as *mahdi*, is found in three places in the Qur'an: *He whom God guides is rightly guided (al-muhtadi)*.¹⁸ According to one view, the verse, *and to every people a guide*,¹⁹ refers to the Mahdi.

To come to the narrations about the Mahdi: one cannot say that they are many, but it is said that a renewer or regenerator (*mujaddid*) will appear every century. Since the concepts related to the Mahdi are abstract, there may be many persons every century who fit them. It has been said that Jesus the son of Mary was a Mahdi in this sense.²⁰

The Mahdi is mentioned explicitly in Hadith sources like Abu Da'ud, Tirmidhi, and Ibn Maja, from the six major collections. al-Shawkani, the famous Yemeni scholar, said there were fifty Hadiths about the Mahdi. He divides these into 'sound' (*ṣaḥīḥ*), most probably sound (*ḥasan*), and 'weak' (*ḍa'if*). In his view, as a whole they are at the level of being unanimously reported (*mutawātir*). Whereas Siddiq Hasan Khan mentions thirty-three Hadith on the subject, including ones which are 'weak'.²¹

17. Sa'd Muḥammad Ḥasan, *al-Mahdiyya fi'l-Islām*, 195.

18. Qur'an, 7:178; 17:97; 18:17.

19. Qur'an, 13:7.

20. Ibn Kathīr, 'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'il b. 'Umar, *Alāmāt al-Qiyāma*, Cairo 1980, 33.

21. Siddiq Ḥasan Khān, *al-Idhā'a limā kāna wa mā yakūnu bayna'l-yaday al-Sā'a*, Cairo 1407/1986, 114.

Although they are not classified as 'sound,' a 'saviour' at the end of time called "Imam" and "Khalifa" is mentioned in Bukhari and Muslim. In Bukhari, he is called "Imam." Commenting on the Hadith, "What will your condition be, when, although your Imam is one of you, the son of Mary will descend?"²² scholars like Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani and the recent al-Kashmiri have said that it is the Mahdi that is intended by the Imam mentioned here.²³ Ibn Hajar, even, says that Jesus performing the prayers at the end of time before someone from the Umma is evidence for authentic views concerning the appearance of the Mahdi. In the continuation of his discussion he relates from Imam Shafi'i that the narrations stating that the Mahdi will be from this Umma and that Jesus will perform the prayers behind him are unanimously reported (*mutawātir*). While the famous *kalām* scholar Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani understood the Mahdi from the term "Imam," and stated that this Hadith refers to the Mahdi.²⁴

The Hadith in Muslim refers to a period of plenty and affluence at the end of time, and mentions a Caliph (*Khalifa*) who will distribute unbounded wealth.²⁵ Some have interpreted this Hadith in the light of the plenty at the time of 'Umar b. al-'Aziz. But the phrase in the Hadith "at the end of my Umma" shows that this plenty will occur in the last times of the Umma. Besides this, there are Hadiths connected with the Mahdi in sources like Abu Da'ud, Tirmidhi, Ibn Maja, and Ahmad b. Hanbal's *Musnad*. It is understood that Abu Da'ud attached the greatest importance to the Mahdi question for he assigned a separate section to it in his *Sunan*.

According to a narration by Umm Salama, God's Messenger (PBUH) said: "The Mahdi will be from my seed, and will be a descendant of my daughter Fatima."²⁶

In another narration recorded by Abu Da'ud, he said: "If the world has only one day left, God will lengthen it and send that person from me." And in another: "... someone from my family whose name is the same as mine, and whose father's name is the same as my father's name. Contrarily to the world being filled with oppression and wrongdoing as it was previously, that person will fill it with justice and right."²⁷

While in another narration, the Mahdi's lineage, physical characteristics, and activities are described as follows: "The Mahdi will be one of us. His forehead will be broad and his nose fine. He will fill the face of the earth with justice, as it had previously been filled with wrongdoing."²⁸

In a narration from 'Ali, it says that God will bestow knowledge, understanding, and guidance on the Mahdi in a short space of time, even in one night.

22. *Bukhārī*, al-Anbiyā', 49.

23. al-'Asqalānī, Ibn Hajar, *al-Fath al-Bārī*, Riyāḍ 1389/1969, vi, 570; al-Kashmirī, *al-Taṣrīḥ*, Ḥalab. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 1385/1965, 97.

24. al-Taftazānī, *Sharḥ al-Muqāṣid*, Beirut 1989, v, 314.

25. *Muslim*, Fitān, 67-9.

26. *Aḥū Dā'ūd*, al-Mahdi, 1.

27. *Aḥū Dā'ūd*, al-Mahdi, 1; *Tirmidhī*, al-Fitan, 52; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, i, 99.

28. *Aḥū Dā'ūd*, al-Mahdi, 1.

God's Messenger (PBUH) said: "The Mahdi will be of us. God will bestow guidance on him in a single night."²⁹

Again as Abu Da'ud has recorded, one day 'Ali looked at his son Hasan and said: "This son of mine is a 'Sayyid,' so named by God's Messenger (PBUH). Someone will appear from his progeny who will bear the name of God's Messenger. He will resemble God's Messenger in deportment, but not in form." He then went on to describe his filling the face of the earth with justice.³⁰ These narrations which are included in reliable Hadith sources like the 'Six Books' are accepted by the Umma. From the point of view of the methodology of Hadith, there have been no objections raised about them suggesting they are false. Nevertheless, some weak Hadiths have also been recorded. Scholars of Hadith have discovered unreliable narrators in some narrations. For example, there are two unreliable narrators in the chain of authorities of a Hadith narrated from Husayn: "God's Messenger (PBUH) told Fatima: Good tidings for you! The Mahdi will be of your line."³¹

As is related in the sources, someone asked 'Ali about the Mahdi and he replied: "He will appear at the end of time. He will come at a time people will be condemned to death for saying 'Allah.'" And he continued: "God will gather around him a community who will fear nothing and will seek no benefits."³² Although this is included in some books of Hadith, it is in fact not a Hadith, but a saying of 'Ali (May God be pleased with him).

There is the following Hadith mentioning the Mahdi's high standing: "We, the sons of 'Abd al-Muttalib, are the lords of the people of Paradise; me, Hamza, 'Ali, Ja'far, Hasan, Husayn, and the Mahdi."³³ For this reason, Tawus al-Yamani longed to live to see him. It is said that there is consensus about the Mahdi coming after the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs and Companions in respect of spiritual rank.³⁴

Although no Hadith gives any information about when the Mahdi will appear, in one recorded by Tirmidhi it says that he will appear in the east.³⁵ The famous Qur'anic commentator Qurtubi (d. 671/1272) said he would appear in North Africa, but the narration he related concerning this is not authentic.³⁶ Qurtubi died in the early years of the Granada Nusayri's, when it was the only part of Spain left to the Muslims. According to Macdonald, Qurtubi's saying that the Mahdi would appear in North Africa arose from the need for a reformer and Mahdi at that time.³⁷

29. Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad*, i, 84.

30. *Abū Dā'ūd*, al-Mahdi, 1.

31. Šiddiq Hasan Khān, *al-Idhā'a*, 130.

32. Šiddiq Hasan Khān, *al-Idhā'a*, 128.

33. *Tirmidhī*, al-Fitan, 52; *Ibn Māja*, al-Fitan, 34.

34. al-Haythamī, Abu'l-'Abbās Ahmad b. Hajar, *al-Qawl al-Muhtaşar fi'l-Mahdī'l-Muntaẓar*, Cairo 1406/1986; al-Safārīnī, *Lawāmi' al-Anwār*, ii, 85. Imam Rabbani says: "The Mahdi's rank appears to be higher than that of the Companions." See, Imām Rabbānī, *al-Maktūhāt*, Istanbul n.d., i, 45.

35. *Tirmidhī*, al-Fitan, 79.

36. al-Haythamī, *al-Qawl al-Muhtaşar*, 24.

37. Macdonald, D. B., "Mahdi," in *IA*, vii, 477.

The Meccan scholar al-Haythami (d. 973/1565) recorded that contrary to what is thought, the Mahdi's struggle will be bloodless. He says: "Those who pay allegiance to him will do so between the *Rukn* and *Maqam* (close to the Ka'ba). They will not awake those who are sleeping, and will certainly spill no blood."³⁸ This refutes the idea that the Mahdi's struggle will be with the sword, which has become a generally held belief.

Muhyiddin al-'Arabi (d. 638/1240) says that God will send His Caliph (*Khalifa*) at a time of widespread oppression and wrongdoing. He will fill the earth with justice. He will follow the path of God's Messenger without error. There will be an invisible angel who will correct his errors. In his time, a man who is ignorant, stingy, and cowardly in the evening, will be most learned, generous, and bold the following morning."³⁹

Despite their differences, the shared points of the Hadiths may be said to be as follows: a) A person called the Mahdi who will be a descendant of God's Messenger (PBUH) will appear and establish justice; b) his name will be similar to that of God's Messenger; c) he will bring plenty and peace.

The contemporary writer Mawdudi, who considered that it was a sign of weakness that the Hadiths on this subject had not been included in Imam Malik, Bukhari and Muslim, accepted that some of them were sound, although he pointed out that the majority of narrators of Hadiths about the Mahdi were Shi'is. He said that in principle, God's Messenger did not go into details. He pointed out that the Hadiths could have been fabricated in the 'Abbasid period for the purpose of supporting the Caliphate. He particularly considered to be false the Hadiths about the support of "the black bannered ones," a sign of the 'Abbasids.⁴⁰ The Egyptian scholar Ahmad Amin says that this justifies rejecting all the Hadiths about the Mahdi.⁴¹ He considered that they were narrations that had been fabricated in connection with the struggle for power between the Umayyads and 'Abbasids. While the matter the Iraqi scholar Muhsin 'Abd al-Hamid criticizes are the Hadiths concerning the Mahdi which the Shi'a expect.⁴² al-Albani alludes to the soundness of the Hadiths, saying: "The appearance of the Mahdi is a fact accepted by scholars."⁴³

However, although Hadith specialists accept the existence of weak narrations, they are of the opinion that it is not possible to deny the Mahdi question in Hadith literature, in respect of either the name or the concept. For they are narrated by the most eminent of the Companions, among whom are 'Ali b. Abi Talib, Ibn 'Abbas, Ibn 'Umar, Talha, Ibn Mas'ud, Abu Hurayra, Anas b. Malik, Umm Salama, Abu Sa'id al-Khudri, Umm Habiba, Thawban, Qurra b. Iyas, 'Abdullah b. Harith b. al-Jaz', and 'Ali al-Hilali. The narrations were verified by

38. al-Haythami, *al-Qawl al-Muhtasar*, 53.

39. al-'Arabi, *Muhyi'l-Din, al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, 366.

40. Mevdudi, Ebu'l-A'la, *Meseleler ve Cüzümler* [Turk. trans: Yusuf Kara], Istanbul 1990, 45.

41. Ahmad Amin, *Duha'l-Islam*, iii, 237-8.

42. Muhsin Abdülhamid, *Islam'a Yönelen Yıkıcı Hareketler* [Turk. trans: M. Saim Yeprem/Hasan Güleç], 53.

43. al-Albani, Näsir al-Din, *Silsilat al-Ahādith al-Shāhiha*, Kuwait 1404/1984, ii, 336; iii, 38-43.

famous authorities on Hadiths like Abu Da'ud, Tirmidhi, Ibn Maja, al-Bazzar, al-Hakim, and Tabarani. If there is anything vague in these Hadiths, it springs not from their being weak but from the conciseness of the Prophet's language. They have become so widely known and accepted by the Umma that scholars like al-Kattani said that they are in effect unanimously reported by a number of authorities (*mutawātir al-ma'na*).⁴⁴

It has been noted by many writers that the Mahdi Hadiths were seriously criticized by the Muslim historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun (733/1332). They have said even that Ibn Khaldun denied the existence of the Mahdi because he considered the Hadiths about the subject to be weak. And in truth we see that Ibn Khaldun was one of the scholars who has dealt with the question in detailed manner. He says that events which will occur in the future pertain to the Unseen (*ghayb*), and that man cannot know such matters if they are not informed of them by God by means of revelation or dreams. In objective manner he states that the Mahdi question has been famous among Muslims down the centuries and it has been believed that the appearance is necessary of someone who will strengthen religion and establish justice. Ibn Khaldun analyses Hadiths on the subject, together with their chains of authorities and narrators, and comes to this conclusion: "It appears that with very few exceptions, the Hadiths have not been free of criticism."⁴⁵ It is not possible to conclude from this that Ibn Khaldun denied the Mahdi question. He criticizes the sufis' understanding of it, which was pretty detailed. In his opinion, their views about the Mahdi were derived from Shi'ism.

It is seen from this that even Ibn Khaldun, who approached the Mahdi Hadiths very cautiously, did not reject the question outright. He said: "with very few exceptions." It may be understood from this that even if they are few in number, there are sound Hadiths on the subject. I am therefore of the opinion that it would be wrong to reject the Hadiths out of hand, and that even if there are weak ones among them, it does not mean they should all be denied. It is clear that one does not have to conclude that all the apples in the basket are rotten if one or two are.

Ibn Khaldun makes the following sociological point: "It is a sociological fact that if someone appears unsupported by any force or people, he will not be successful only by being related to the Prophet's Family. The power of a people is necessary to be successful in order to support him and defend him until he can gain a dominant position."⁴⁶ He points out that someone on his own will be unable to achieve largescale reforms.

I want to include Mawdudi's interpretation here. He says that there is no particular position or place in religion for the Mahdi. It is completely wrong to think that one is obliged to believe in the Mahdi as one is obliged to believe in the prophets: "Whenever the Mahdi does come, he will have thorough knowledge of

44. al-Kattānī, Muḥammad b. Ja'far, *Naẓm al-Mutanāthir fī Khabar al-Mutawātir*, Aleppo n.d., 144-6.

45. Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, ii, 822.

46. Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, ii, 817.

the learning, culture, conditions, and necessities of the time, he will take steps appropriate to that time, he will take advantage of the scientific discoveries and technology of the time, and employ them in the best way."⁴⁷

IV. Bediuzzaman's views on the Mahdi question

Bediuzzaman explains first of all the reasons for the question being vague and the Mahdi not being known by everyone. Due to the vagueness about certain persons who are to appear at the end of time, like the Mahdi and Sufyan, they were awaited long previously, even in the time of the generation following the Companions. They hoped to live to see them.

"Like with the end of the world, Divine wisdom requires that the times of these individuals are not specified. Because every age is in need of the meaning of the Mahdi, who will strengthen the people's morale and save them from despair. Each century has to have a share of this meaning. And so that people should not heedlessly conform to evil things and the reins of their indifferent souls should not be left free, every century the fearsome individuals who come to lead strife must be shrunk from and feared. If they had been specified, general guidance would have been of no benefit."⁴⁸

We may say therefore that in Bediuzzaman's view every age has its Mahdi. It is understood from this that the Mahdi is not an individual. Although he speaks of "the Great Mahdi,"

"...since there is need for a sort of Mahdi every age at the time of despair, in order to strengthen morale, through Divine mercy, every age, or perhaps every century, a sort of Mahdi has emerged from the Prophet's Family, and has preserved the Shari'a of his forefather and revived his Sunna."

As an example for the world of politics, he gives Mahdi (875-885), the third of the 'Abbasid Caliphs. And for the world of religion he gives Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir Gilani and Shah Naqshband. He describes them as "persons who carried out some of the functions of the Great Mahdi."⁴⁹

He says that the Great Mahdi will receive his strength from the community of Sayyids, who are descended from Muhammad (PBUH) and are called *Al-i Bayt* (the Prophet's Family). "There is no family that is as mutually supportive, and no tribe that is in such agreement, and no group or community that is as enlightened as the family, tribe, group, and community of the Prophet's Family."⁵⁰

When commenting on the verse, *Say: I ask of you no recompense save love of close kin*,⁵¹ Bediuzzaman says that God's Messenger's (PBUH) wanting this love was not due to blood relationship; he wanted the Umma to unite around his family because the elevated persons and spiritual guides of the Umma would for the most part emerge from his family:

47. Mevdudi, *Meseleler ve Çözümler*, 47, 50, 51.

48. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Sözler*, İstanbul 1986, 309-10 / *The Words* [English trans.], İstanbul, Sözler Publications 1993, 353.

49. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Şualar*, 496.

50. *Şualar*, 496.

51. Qur'an, 42:23.

"With his vision which penetrated the Unseen, God's Messenger (PBUH) saw that his Family would become like a light-giving tree within the world of Islam. The overwhelming majority of those who would perform the duty of guides instructing every level of the World of Islam in human attainment and perfection would emerge from his Family."

Bediuzzaman explains the Prophet's great tenderness for Hasan and Husayn as not arising from out of feelings of family or kinship, but because he saw the Imams, spiritual poles, and Mahdis who would emerge from their blessed lines, "and he would kiss their heads in the name of all of them. Yes, Shah Geylani has a large part in his kissing Hasan's head."⁵² He is saying here that God's Messenger gave the greatest importance to his Family, emphasizing that Muslims should unite around them in every period and strive to revive Islam, and that numerous Mahdis had emerged from his descendants. It is understood too that the Mahdi is not just one person.

Bediuzzaman gives various examples of eminent persons from the Prophet's Family, and it is his view that they were all Mahdis. For example, Sayyid Ahmad al-Sanusi (d. 1320/1902), the leader of the Sanusi Order and spiritual guide of millions; and Sayyid Idris (d. 1370/1950?), who guided more than a hundred thousand people; and another sayyid, Sayyid Yahya (d. 1368/1948), who commanded hundreds of thousands of people. Just as among the individuals of this tribe of Sayyids there are numerous outward commanders, so too there are "the heroes of spiritual heroes," like Sayyid 'Abd al-Qadir Gilani (d. 562/1167), Sayyid Abu'l-Hasan al-Shazali (d. 657/1258), and Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi (d. 675/1276).⁵³ Since they were all permanently in the service of Islam, by being leaders of sufi orders or in some other way, he describes them as "commanders."

In the supplication in the *tashahhud* in the five daily prayers, which is recited by all Muslims at least five times every day, it is said: "O God, grant blessings to our master Muhammad and to the Family of our master Muhammad, as you granted blessings to Abraham and to the Family of Abraham." The prophets of the Family of Abraham illuminated mankind with the light of guidance. Although the Family of Muhammad cannot attain the degree of the prophets, they have all performed the service of a prophet and continue to do so. Bediuzzaman says that the totality of those commanders forms a vast army. If they acquired a physical form and through their solidarity were formed into a division, and if they aroused the religion of Islam and its sacred nationhood and bound it together in unity, no nation or force could withstand them. "Thus, that numerous and powerful army is the Family of Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him), the most select of the Mahdi's armies."⁵⁴

52. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Lem'alar*, 20-1 / *The Flashes Collection* [Eng. trans.], Istanbul, Sözlür Publications 1995, 36-7.

53. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Mektûbat*, Istanbul 1976, 412 / *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Letters 1928-1932* [Eng. trans.], Istanbul, Sözlür Publications 1994, 515 fn 6.

54. *Mektûbat*, 412 / *Letters*, 515.

"Yes, today in the world there is no family distinguished by such high honour and elevated qualities and nobility in its descendants, in unbroken succession and well-documented genealogy, which is as powerful and important as the line of Sayyids of the Family of the Prophet. Since early times it is they who have been at the heads of all the groups of the people of truth, and they who have been the renowned leaders of the people of perfection. Now it is a blessed line numbering millions. Vigilant and circumspect, their hearts full of belief and love of the Prophet, they are distinguished by the honour of their world-renowned lineage. Momentous events shall occur which will awaken and arouse the sacred force within that vast community... Certainly, the elevated ardour in that huge force will surge up and the Mahdi shall come to lead it, guiding it to the way of truth and reality. We await from the Divine law and Divine mercy that it should be such, and its being such, like we await the coming of spring after winter; and we are right to await it..."⁵⁵

While describing the functions and duties of the Mahdi and the luminous community which is tied to him, Bediuzzaman says that they "will repair the destruction of the innovative regime of the Sufyan's covert organization."⁵⁶ It is understood from this that the Mahdi's duties will not be based on brute force and the use of force, they will consist of 'repairing' and reforming of a spiritual and moral kind.

It is seen from this that Bediuzzaman's ideas about the Mahdi are in conformity with Ibn Khaldun's sociological analysis. It is my opinion that if people like the contemporary writers 'Abd al-Karim al-Hatib and 'Abdullah al-Samman, who reject the idea of the Mahdi, had seen this interpretation, they would not have rejected the question outright.

Bediuzzaman was not in expectation of an extra-ordinary figure. He believed that everything occurs within the framework of the universal laws. Whether or not the apparent meanings of the Qur'an and Sunna were conformable with reason, he was not an unprogressive, rigid scholar in that respect. For instance, he discusses terms like 'reformer,' 'perfect guide,' 'regenerator of religion,' and 'Caliph' within the category of Mahdi. He considers it essential from the point of view of "God's laws" that there are "reformers" in times of strife and dissension. Thus, God Almighty will send a luminous person as a supreme renewer and guide at the time of greatest corruption at the end of time, and that person will be a member of the Prophet's Family.⁵⁷

However powerful an individual is, he cannot carry out extensive reforms on his own. Bediuzzaman thus elucidates the matter that Ibn Khaldun mentioned as a sociological point, "relying on a power." In Bediuzzaman's view, the source of the Mahdi's power would be the Prophet's descendants, that is, the people of his line. He indicates that they are fairly numerous and powerful. It is they who are at the head of the people of reality. They number millions. The momentous affairs that will occur will be set into motion by the sacred power residing in that vast community. He considers that the Divine laws necessitate the realization of this.⁵⁸

55. *Mektûbat*, 412-3 / *Letters*, 515.

56. *Mektûbat*, 413 / *Letters*, 515.

57. *Mektûbat*, 411-2 / *Letters*, 514.

58. *Mektûbat*, 412 / *Letters*, 514.

Bediuzzaman says that the Mahdi will carry out three important functions: (a) silencing completely the idea of materialism; this is also called the stage of belief; (b) reviving the marks of Islam, which is also called the stage of life; (c) with the assistance of all believers and support of Islamic unity, and the joining together of all the scholars and saints, and particularly the many Sayyids each century, he will strive to carry out that great function; this is also called the stage of the Shari'a.⁵⁹ Thus, the Mahdi will not appear with his sword in his hand and reform everything. It is understood that he shall carry out reforms not on his own, but together with a large movement formed of the Prophet's Family, who constitute a pure, unsullied mass of Muslims. In another work, the Mahdi's three functions are described like this: belief, life, and the Shari'a, the most important of which according to Bediuzzaman is belief.⁶⁰

"At this time there are currents so overwhelming that they draw everything to their own account. So even if the true awaited person, who will come next century, were to come now, my conjecture is that he would forego the situation in the political world and change his goal so as not to let his movement be carried away on those currents.

"Also, there are three matters: one is life, another is the Shari'a, and another is belief. In the view of reality, the most important and the greatest is the question of belief. But in the view of most people at this time, compelled by the world situation, the most important appear to be life and the Shari'a. And so, even if he was to come now, since to change these three matters altogether throughout the world is not keeping with the Divine laws in force in human kind, he would surely take the greatest matter as the basis, and not the others, so that the service of belief would not spoil its purity in the general view and so that he would not let that service be the tool for other aims in the minds of ordinary people, who are easily deceived."⁶¹

If Bediuzzaman's words are noted carefully, it is seen that he does not consider the Mahdi to be someone who will set everything in order miraculously with the sword. He sees him as a normal human being and great reformer, and speaks of the luminous community around him. He says he will revive the Sunna of God's Messenger (PBUH) and that his struggle with the forces of evil will be moral and spiritual. From the point of view of the Divine laws, it would be possible for someone who acts in this way within the bounds of causality to be successful. God, Who in a minute fills the space between the heavens and earth with clouds and empties it, and calms a storm at sea in a second, and creates the summer in an hour within the spring, and a winter storm in summer in an hour, can certainly dispel the darknesses of the Islamic world through the Mahdi.⁶²

It is said in a Hadith that there will be a group in Islamic society which will always persist in right: "There will be a group of my Umma which will persist in right until the end of the world."⁶³ God's Messenger (PBUH) mentions a group

59. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Emirdağ Lahikası*, İstanbul 1958, i, 259-60.

60. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Kastamonu Lahikası*, 57.

61. *Kastamonu Lahikası*, 58.

62. *Mektûbat*, 411-2 / *Letters*, 514.

63. *Muslim*, al-İmān, 247.

in this Hadith, which was recorded by Muslim. He says that this group will renew religious matters, strive in the way of religion, spread justice, will adopt absolutely correct measures, and present Islam to humanity. This is in conformity with the natural laws God has placed in the universe, and the spirit of Islam and its practical teachings. Almighty God can create true Mahdis and hundreds of reformers every age, and that is in fact what He has done. And so it shall be in the future.

Bediuzzaman comments on the above Hadith and remarks that the service performed by the students of the *Risale-i Nur*, "the Qur'anic miracle this century," may be included in its meaning. He makes a number of predictions concerning the continuation in the coming century of the service of the *Risale-i Nur* that he had begun. He deduces from a Hadith that this service will become increasingly brilliant until the start of the 16th century of the Hijra, following which an evil movement will gain dominance.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Wherever there is strife and destruction, the question arises of a good and reform movement to combat it. This means that reform movements are a natural need of the Islamic Umma, necessitated by a law God has placed in the universe. It is a social fact that people will be in need of reformers at the end of time, when social and moral corruption will increase, and disbelief and denial become more widespread. On looking at history from the sociological point of view, that is how it has always been.

The institution of the Mahdi is not a basic article of faith for the Ahl-i Sunna (the Sunnis) as it is with the Shi'a. Certain proof is not therefore required for the matters connected with the events of the end of time, which are not counted among the fundamentals of belief but as secondary matters. It is sufficient "only not to reject them or attack them." It is true the Mahdi is not mentioned by name in Bukhari and Muslim, but one may say that he is mentioned as a concept under such names as "Imam," "Caliph," "a group which will persist in right," and so on, which will undertake the role of the Mahdi. Ibn Khaldun criticized the Hadiths about the Mahdi, but he did not reject them outright. He agreed that some were 'sound,' even only a few of them. Moreover, the meaning of a Hadith is not necessarily wrong if it is 'weak' or 'forged.' Even if it is certain it is not a Hadith, it may still be right in meaning.

According to Bediuzzaman, belief in the appearance of a person, the Mahdi, in a particular place or at a particular time is wrong. For there may be reformers who bear this meaning, and virtuous persons, in every period. It is heedlessness to idly expect the Mahdi to set everything to rights, and an unknown person to appear and save society; to neglect one's duties and responsibilities because the Mahdi is going to come. If the idea of the Mahdi truly causes society to be lazy and idle, it is wrong. But if like the Americans who plant up their country with

64. For further explanation, see, *Kastamonu Lahikası*, 23.

trees in preparation of Jesus' coming, the Muslims make efforts to prepare the ground for the Mahdi, it is a good thing.

As is understood from Bediuzzaman's writings, the Mahdi is not an individual, but a movement, school, or community, whose activities are spread over a considerable period of time. For it is not possible for an individual to establish justice, as is stated in Hadiths. This may be carried only through the joint action of a community, a numerous collectivity, or a large group of Muslims. In my opinion, one may think of the Mahdi as a concept. In every period, believers are on the side of good and right. And at all times there is need for this, for there has always been conflict between good and evil, and so it will continue till the end of the world. Therefore, so long as the way of good is taken, it means that the result of following the Mahdi has been achieved. It is much more to the point to be present wherever good is rather than waiting for an imaginary Mahdi. Everything being clear and obvious is opposed to the principle of trial and examination. Even if someone is the Mahdi, it will not be announced from the heavens. However, it is not right to reject the idea of the Mahdi outright because false Mahdis might appear. False prophets appeared like Musaylimat al-Kazzab, but it did not mean prophethood had to be rejected. And the appearance of phony doctors does not necessitate rejecting the medical profession. Bediuzzaman's views are in conformity with the laws in force in the universe. There is nothing in them exceeding the bounds of what is reasonable... Bediuzzaman states that there are numerous Mahdis. The Great Mahdi expected at the end of time is the last of the Mahdis and reformers. He too will be a normal human being, not superhuman. He will perform his function within the framework of the laws of creation and on an international level.

* * *