Among scholars of Islam and some Muslims today, a curious misperception dominates: that only the Shi‘a believe in the coming of the Mahdi. Sunni Arab views of the Mahdi since the Six Days War of 1967 have reached unburied depths of eschatological belief and the vigorous debate among the Arab intelligentsia concerning these beliefs, as well as the degree to which they impact the Muslim social and political realms, have followed suit.

Modern discourse, particularly in the American media, tends to distill Islamic ideological categories into only two “fundamentalists,” who are portrayed negatively, and “reformers,” who are depicted in a more positive light. However, this reductionist paradigm fails to take into account the eclectic views of many Muslims. At the least, the viewer who expects the imminent arrival of the Mahdi and attempts not only to anchor eschatology in current events but also to reconfigure the politico-military context so as to hasten his arrival.

Eschatological figures in Islam

The term “al-Mahdi,” meaning “rightly-guided,” frequently appears nowhere in the Qur’an. Rather, the characteristics and role of the eschatological Mahdi, as well as the political context in which he will appear, are described in a number of hadith, or traditions. Three of the six major 9th-century CE compilers of hadith – Ibn Maja‘, Abu Dzî’sî, and Al-Tirmidhi – do mention the Mahdi. However, the two most authoritative compilers, Al-Bukhârî and Muslim b-A‘l-Hadîj, eschew such accounts. The source of Mahdi narratives plays into whether one accepts the idea as legitimate, as we shall see below.

Just who is this Mahdi, according to the traditions? He is one of the five major eschatological figures of Islam, along with Jesus, the Dajjâl, ‘Antichrist (Arabic: Al-Dâbîb or ‘Aast’), and the collective entity Yâjiy and Mâjiy, “Goat and Magog.” The parallels with Christian eschatology, even mutatis mutandis, are obvious: all of these end-time figures appear in the New Testament, especially Revelation 14:21, where Christ is depicted as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and in the anonymous work, the Apocalypse of John, which is attributed to the Apostle John. Just as the angel Isrâ‘îl will blow his trumpet twice: at the first, all humans will die; at the second all will be resurrected for the Judgement. The pages of every Qur’ân and the predominant view of eschatology in current events but also to reconfigure the politico-military context so as to hasten his arrival.

Mahdism today

The Muslim world today is devoid of Mahdist claimants – so far. However, an Arab debate has arisen about the truth of Mahdism and expectations for its imminent arrival. This is one that millenarian movements within the entire Judaeo-Christian-Islamic milieu escalate sharply in a period of societal and political turmoil, which it resembles. Although the phenomenon of false prophets, speaking an eschatological language, has been a part of history for most of human existence, one need not look beyond the pages of the Bible to note the phenomenon, which is referred to as the “false prophet.” The non-Mahdist Muhammad Farzî Hijab, in In the Shadow of the Elders of Zion: The Masonic Lodge and Jean Dixon (the American psychic) into his philosophy of Mahdist. Amin al-Jamal, a global publication, reports on the cooperation between the Mahdi and Jesus, who argues that the Mahdi and Jesus will cooperate to create a ‘united world state.”

One final example of Mahdist believers is Fahd Sâlim who, in his 1996 book, The Signs of the Hour and the Attack of the West before the end of the 20th century, maintain that the Mahdi will come by means of a Christian Messiah and New Testament to argue that...