

REVIVING THE DYNAMICS OF THE SAFAVID ERA'S MAHDISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FUNCTIONALISM, DYSFUNCTION AND NON-FUNCTION

Zahra Sadat Keshavarz¹, Maryam Saeidian Jazi

*Department of Islamic Studies. Faculty of
Theology and the Teaching of Ahl Al-Bayt (A.S.).
University of Isfahan. Isfahan. Iran.

Corresponding author:
¹zahra.sadat.keshavarz@
gmail.com

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol28no1.8>

Abstract

This research reinterprets Safavid-era Mahdism from a functionalist perspective. The aim of this article is to analyze, in addition to the functional dimension of Mahdism in the Safavid era, its dysfunctional and non-functional aspects. This research is very important because it attempts to conduct a sociological analysis using reliable historical data and library-based research, and to reinterpret the socio-political conditions of the Safavid era in light of Mahdism. The approach of this research is interdisciplinary (historical-sociological). The methods used in this article are the historical method and the analytical-theoretical method, which analyze historical data based on sociological theories. The findings indicate that the functions of Mahdism include preserving national-territorial integrity against the Ottomans and Uzbeks, fostering national solidarity, and facilitating the transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. Its dysfunctions, however, include the emergence of false claimants, the construction of an ideological justification for the lord-vassal structure through the notions of representation and connection, and the

Article

History:
Acceptance
date: 12 March
2026
Available
Online: 30
June 2026

Funding: This
research
received no
specific grant
from any
funding agency
in the public,
commercial or
not-for-profit
sectors.

**Competing
interest:** The
author have
declared that
no competing
interest exist.

inability to reabsorb social forces. Its non-function indicates the gradual decline of state governance. The corresponding social forces, identified according to their functional, dysfunctional, and non-functional dimensions, include kings, clerics, writers, historians, false claimants, Ghālī groups, and Sufis.

Keywords: Mahdism; functionalism, dysfunction; non-function; Safavid era.

Khulasah

Kajian ini mentafsirkan semula fahaman Mahdisme pada zaman Safawi daripada perspektif fungsionalisme. Objektif makalah ini adalah menganalisis dimensi fungsi fahaman Mahdisme pada era Safawi, di samping meneliti aspek disfungsi dan ketidakfungsian dalam fahaman tersebut. Kajian ini amat signifikan kerana ia berusaha mengemukakan suatu analisis sosiologi yang memanfaatkan data sejarah yang sahih melalui penyelidikan kepustakaan, sekaligus mentafsirkan semula keadaan sosial politik zaman Safawi berpaksikan doktrin Mahdisme. Pendekatan kajian ini bersifat rentas disiplin, iaitu iaitu melibatkan gabungan bidang sejarah dan sosiologi. Kaedah yang digunakan dalam makalah ini ialah kaedah sejarah dan kaedah analitikal-teoretikal, yang menganalisis data sejarah berdasarkan teori-teori sosiologi. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa fungsi Mahdisme meliputi pemeliharaan keutuhan wilayah-kebangsaan dalam menghadapi Uthmaniyah dan Uzbek, pemupukan solidariti nasional, serta pemudahcaraan peralihan daripada monarki mutlak kepada monarki berperlembagaan. Walau bagaimanapun, disfungsi Mahdisme merangkumi kemunculan para pendakwa palsu, pembinaan justifikasi ideologi terhadap struktur tuan tanah dan hamba melalui gagasan perwakilan dan hubungan, serta ketidakmampuan untuk menyerap semula kuasa-kuasa sosial. Aspek ketidakfungsian Mahdisme pula menunjukkan kemerosotan beransur-ansur dalam tadbir urus negara. Kuasa-kuasa sosial yang berkaitan,

yang dikenal pasti berdasarkan dimensi fungsional, disfungsional dan tidak fungsionalnya, terdiri daripada raja-raja, ulama, penulis, sejarawan, para pendakwa palsu, kelompok Ghālī dan ahli sufi.

Kata kunci: Mahdism; fungsionalisme; disfungsi; ketidakfungsian; Zaman Safawi.

Introduction

The Safavid dynasty is widely recognized for its distinctive characteristics, which set it apart from both preceding and subsequent periods. This dynasty was marked by significant historical hegemony, shaping common perceptions as confirmed by available historical documents. Among its defining features, the flow, approach, wisdom, and discourse surrounding Mahdism played a crucial role, influencing various dimensions of the political, cultural, and social structures of the time. This phenomenon became a foundational concept that attracted scholars, jurists, and intellectuals, serving as a catalyst for numerous political and social developments during this historical transition.

In Islam, particularly within the Shi'ite branch, Mahdism closely parallels the Messianic fervor found in various Christian sects. This doctrine is anchored in a profound belief in the promise of a savior, a perennial element throughout human history. Whether framed through a Shi'ite lens or viewed as a universal faith in a promised day, this belief transcends mere ritualistic practice, possessing a unique capacity to shape and construct social and political structures. Thus, Mahdism became a fundamental pillar of both the political and social framework. This belief is universal and not specific to monotheistic religions, and therefore encompasses many

aspects of society's need for transcendence and liberation.¹ Essentially, the savior in all religions is the redeeming Christ who will create a new world and break the chain of history.²

During a chaotic chapter in Iranian history, the Safavid dynasty leveraged the doctrine of Mahdism to drive its cultural, political, and social movements. Quite apart from the practical successes or failures of their governance, Mahdism became an axiomatic discourse that shaped the era's administration and socio-political landscape. This study addresses the need for a focused examination of the doctrine's dominant influence. Utilizing a documentary research method, this article adopts an interdisciplinary approach that blends historical data with sociological analysis. By applying Robert Merton's functionalist theory to the historical evidence, the study systematically explores the functional, non-functional, and dysfunctional dimensions of Mahdism under the Safavids. In doing so, it moves away from traditionally uncritical, affirmative interpretations to offer a more critical, balanced perspective. By moving beyond the prevailing hegemonic views, particularly regarding Mahdism, and addressing both its functional and dysfunctional aspects, we can gain a more nuanced understanding. This perspective could lead to a decrease in academic knowledge and an increase in hegemonic readings.

Analyzing Mahdism through its functional, dysfunctional, and non-functional dimensions during the Safavid era helps reconstruct a multi-layered understanding of its impact on social forces. The authors applied a historical-analytical approach, utilizing primary documents and Merton's theory of functionalism to pose the following

¹ Mircea Eliade, "Messianism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 9: 469-472.

² Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 467-472.

question: In addition to its existing functions, does Mahdism also exhibit dysfunctions and non-functions? What are these, and what forces contribute to them?

It is posited that Mahdism, while functioning effectively in certain aspects during the Safavid era, also experienced dysfunction and non-function, provoking reactions among social forces and leading to conflicts over functional demands, unity, and necessity. This dynamic maintained a critical distance from the prevailing ideological interpretations.

While much scholarly focus has been placed on the functions of Mahdism, often in an imbalanced manner, the associated damages or lack of effectiveness can be identified through the lens of functionalism. The dysfunctions of Mahdism represent threats to the overall structure of governance and society, while non-functionality refers to aspects of the socio-political structure that have little impact. In this study, the dysfunctions and non-functions of Mahdism are not inherent to Mahdism itself but are contingent upon the manner of its implementation, which is influenced by the specific historical context.

It seeks to propose a relatively new, clear, and vivid image of dysfunctions and non-functions, by considering Mahdism in the Safavid era to determine the possibilities of imbalance among the mentioned three dimensions concerning their conceptual capacities.

The findings demonstrate that, in addition to its functional aspects, Mahdism also exhibited non-functional elements, which in turn contributed to the emergence of corresponding social forces during this era.

Research Background

Existing studies primarily focus on the functional and, at times, ideological generalities of the Mahdism discourse during the relevant period, often neglecting its pathological dimensions. This study aims to identify the dysfunctional

aspects of Mahdism by analyzing more than 38 texts, including books, dissertations, and articles directly related to secondary topics concerning Mahdism.

Some previous studies have addressed topics similar to those in our article. To review their validity, the following examples can be cited:

In a book, Catherine Babaian has attempted to examine the exaggerated approach to Mahdism in the history of Iranian Shi'ism, including the Safavid period, and to show the reproduction of ancient mythical ideas in the Shi'ite teachings of the Safavid era, while also highlighting the cultural dimensions of teachings such as Mahdi.³

Following this approach, other researchers have adopted a more concrete stance; for example, in a book, Mr. Bashir has examined the history of Mu'awiyahism in Iranian history and considered Mu'awiyahism movements from the beginning of Islam to later ages.⁴

Keshavarz et al.,⁵ in their study based on Max Weber's theoretical framework, elucidated the function of Mahdist thought by identifying civilizational elements, including shari'ah-orientation, rationality, dynamism, and the actualization of a utopian society within the paradigm of the culture of expectancy throughout the cultural trajectory of the Safavid polity. Keshavarz and Saeedyan Jazi move beyond an isolated examination of Mahdism, focusing instead on the contextual conditions of its

³ Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3–5.

⁴ Shahzad Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nurbakhshiya Between Medieval and Modern Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 2.

⁵ Zahra Sadat Keshavarz, Mohammad Ali Chelongar & Asghar Montazerolghaem, "Explanation and Analysis of the Function of the Idea of Promiseism in the Cultural-Civilization Process of the Safavid Government," *Mashreq-e Mo'oud* 13 (2019), 257-294.

emergence through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. They demonstrate how the Safavid era constructed a "chain of equivalence" around belief in a savior, achieving social cohesion across existing differences by employing historiography and jurisprudential texts.⁶ Furthermore, in a separate study, Keshavarz and Saedyan Jazi endeavor to lay the groundwork for a pathological critique of Mahdism during this period, thus preserving their critical distance from the generally ideological readings of the issue.⁷

In addition to these aspects of Mu'awiyah and Mahdism, other scholars have sought to highlight the common religious roots of Mahdism in order to demonstrate that belief in the Mahdī represents a universal characteristic and is not confined to particular religious traditions, such as Shi'ism, or to specific historical periods, such as the Safavid era. For instance, it has been argued that the concept of Mahdism among the Shi'ites is derived both from Jewish theological literature, which is grounded in the notion of a savior who will appear at the end of time, and from Christian theology, which regards Jesus as the savior who came to redeem humanity after the Great Sin.⁸ Other research has gone further, elevating prognostic thinking to the level of discourse and analyzing its structure from a discursive position. For example, Khanghah examined the Mahdist paradigm as an active messianic consciousness that extends beyond theological determinism into the realms of public morality, revolutionary ideology, and

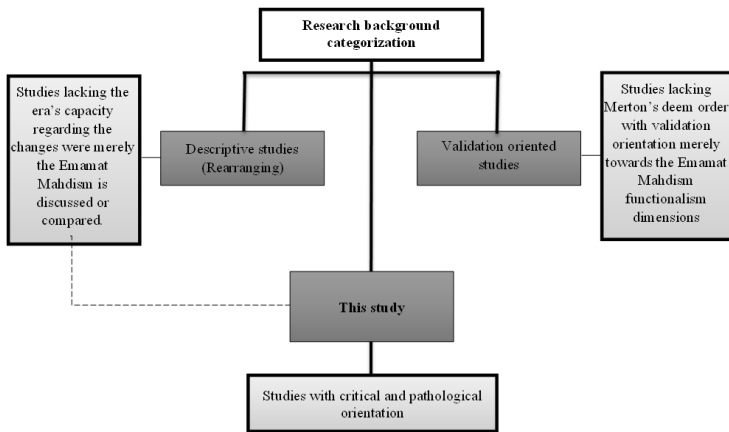
⁶ Zahra Sadat Keshavarz and Maryam Saedyan Jazi, "Creating Chain of Equivalence of Mahdavi Discourse in the Safavid Era," *Historical Researches* 15 (2023), 19-42.

⁷ Zahra Sadat Keshavarz and Maryam Saedyan Jazi, "A New Reading in the Analysis of the Functional Angles of Mahdism in the Safavid Era," *History of Islam and Iran* 33 (2024), 171-198.

⁸ Qais Salem Alma'itah & Zia ul Haq, "The Concept of Messiah in Abrahamic Religions: A Focused Study of the Eschatology of Sunni Islam," *Heliyon* 8(3) (2022), e09080.

global apocalyptic discourse.⁹ However, despite paying attention to the socio-political dimensions of Mahdism, the cultural and doctrinal contexts of the emergence of Promised Islam, the commonalities of religions regarding belief in a savior, and other issues, none of these studies have considered and examined the different and sometimes contradictory aspects of Mahdism as our study has.

Figure 1. Study of Literature Review



Source: Developed by the authors based on the findings of the present study.

Existing studies on Mahdism can be categorized into two groups: first, those that merely describe and compare the phenomenon without delving into its analytical and explanatory aspects, and second, those that focus on the characteristics and features of Mahdism from a purely functional perspective, often influenced by epistemological

⁹ Reza Rezaie Khanghah, “Messianic Consciousness and the Mahdist Paradigm: Reimagining Eschatological Hope in Contemporary Political and Cultural Thought,” *Islamic Philosophical Doctrines* 19 (2025), 53–78.

and sociological biases. This study, however, adopts a confirmatory approach, primarily focusing on the first category and avoiding assessment of data that may be biased.

To overcome the limitations of these categories, this study aims to develop a theoretical framework by applying the principles of organized skepticism and disinterestedness, as outlined by Merton. These institutional imperatives, including universalism, collective ownership, impartiality, organized doubt, modesty, and authenticity, are employed to critically examine the affirmative views about Mahdism in the Safavid era through a pathological approach. By doing so, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of Mahdism, moving beyond the existing drawbacks in the field.¹⁰

Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework follows Ritzer's social reality paradigm.¹¹ The functionalist tradition originates with Durkheim,¹² was systematized by Parsons,¹³ refined by Merton's middle-range theory,¹⁴ extended by

¹⁰ Charles Crothers, Robert K. Merton, and Jerry Gaston, *Key Sociologists Series* (London: Tavistock, 1987), 126; Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 216; Robert K. Merton & Jerry Gaston, "The Normative Structure of Science," in *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 8; Robert K. Merton & Jerry Gaston, *The Sociology of Science in Europe* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 273.

¹¹ George Ritzer, *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science*, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1975), 45.

¹² Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Free Press, 1982), 50-65.

¹³ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: Free Press, 1951), 15-30.

¹⁴ Robert. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 39-72.

Luhmann's systems theory,¹⁵ and further developed by neo-functionalists such as Alexander¹⁶ and Colom.¹⁷ Merton is chosen for three reasons: (a) his middle-range theory enables empirical testability; (b) his distinction between manifest and latent functions refines functional analysis; and (c) his deviance typology remains widely cited.¹⁸ Secularism is not part of Merton's original typology; it may be interpreted as a form of "innovation" only with additional theoretical justification.¹⁹ Thus, this theoretical lineage provides a stable and empirically testable foundation for the present study.

Numerous theorists have contributed to this intellectual tradition, even before Durkheim coined the term functionalism.²⁰ Given that the objective of this study is to analyze the dysfunctions of Mahdism during the Safavid era, Robert Merton's theory is particularly well-suited for this endeavor. Merton's theoretical framework addresses some of the limitations of Durkheim's original ideas and has influenced subsequent thinkers. He conceptualized functionalism as a tripartite structure that provides the necessary theoretical mechanisms for testing the hypotheses of this study.

¹⁵ Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 80-95.

¹⁶ Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Neofunctionalism and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 112-130.

¹⁷ Paul Colom, *European Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), 45-60.

¹⁸ Robert. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 125-149.

¹⁹ David Martin, *Secularization: A New Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 88-102.

²⁰ George Ritzer, *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 130; William Skidmore, *Theoretical Thinking in Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 168; Alvin Ward Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books Ltd., 1970), 461; Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 220.

Merton's analysis focuses on dysfunction and the distinctions between non-function and the principles of functional units, emphasizing the necessity of functionalism. Prior to Merton, the concept of function was predominantly viewed in positive terms. However, he broadened this perspective by categorizing functions into positive, negative, and neutral, both manifest and latent. He defined positive functions as those that benefit other institutions, negative functions as those that hinder them, and neutral functions as those that have no impact.

Building on Durkheim's foundational ideas, Merton sought to refine the concept of functionalism by arguing against the notion that every phenomenon can be solely attributed to a positive function. He recognized dysfunctions as significant elements within this framework.²¹ Consequently, Merton introduced the principles of functional unity, functional incurrence, and functional necessity, which assign functions to every phenomenon while allowing for the possibility of dysfunction. This perspective casts Merton's approach as somewhat pathological within the realm of functionalism, aligning it with the goals of this study, which aims to assess the dysfunctions of Mahdism in the Safavid era.²²

Merton's conceptual framework includes both manifest and latent functionalities, dysfunctions, and non-functions as essential components of functionality. He defined and categorized social reactions and forces based on their functional consequences. According to this framework, individuals, groups, and social forces within a social system respond differently to societal objectives and the means of achieving them.

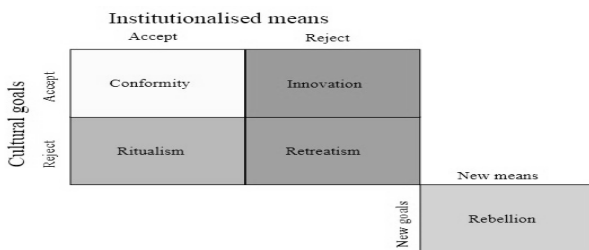
In Merton's typology, five primary elements, conformity, innovation, ritualism, secularism, and

²¹ Ritzer, *Contemporary sociological theory*, 145.

²² Robert. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 104-105.

rebellion, are relevant to the discussion of functionalism, dysfunction, and non-function. This article will specifically focus on the dysfunctions associated with these five elements.

Figure 2: Typology of Social Reactions



Source: Developed by the authors based on the findings of the present study

Table 1: Five types of Social Reactions from Merton's point of view

| Row | deviance types | Social goals | Institutionalized tools |
|-----|----------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Conformity | + | + |
| 2 | Innovation | + | - |
| 3 | Ritualism | - | + |
| 4 | Retreatism | - | - |
| 5 | Rebellion | [±] | [±] |

Functional Aspects of Mahdism in the Safavid Era

Inevitably, every society and culture experience phenomenon that serve specific functions essential for maintaining social order. If a phenomenon lacks functionality, it is unlikely to be established, accepted, or promoted within that society. In this context, the Safavid era, characterized by distinct features, sought to endorse and promote the concept of Mahdism. This was achieved

by emphasizing its functional aspects and coefficients, particularly within the Shi'ite tradition. By examining these elements, we can gain a new understanding of the potential functions of Mahdism during this period.

a. National Solidarity Formulation

The formulation and coherence of national solidarity are rooted in social conceptualization and public belief. In the Safavid era, the emergence of a savior figure can be viewed as one of the key functions associated with Mahdism. This connection was established, and its significant impact can be attributed to the Mahdist beliefs prevalent during this time. The Safavids not only promoted the belief in the Savior within Shi'ism but also extended it beyond this religious framework. In order to build positive relationships, many concepts of interaction have been introduced by Islamic scholars, specifically as guidance for Muslims, that are also universally applicable to the whole nation, regardless of religion or ethnicity.²³

Highlighting Mahdism served as a unifying factor in Iran's historical transitions, fostering solidarity among diverse social groups regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, or identity. This included individuals from various backgrounds, including Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and both Shi'ite and Sunni interpretations of Islam. As Rokhsefat notes, some scholars argue that the acceptance of Mahdism among Iranians during the Safavid era can be traced back to the pre-Islamic era in Iran.²⁴ Reconciliation and solidarity have also been emphasized in other religions. For example, given the presence of Christian Armenians in Safavid Iran, this reconciliation and

²³ Khadijah Mohd Khambali, Nur Hidayah Mohd Paudzi and Abdul Nasser Sultan Mohsen Sallam, "Islamic Perspective on the Concepts of Interaction Among Multicultural Society," *Afkar Journal* 23 (2021), 249.

²⁴ Mateen Rokhsefat, "Modern Islamic Messianism: Eschatology to Teleology," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* XIV (2) (2000), 130–134.

solidarity have also been emphasized in Christian salvationist beliefs. Some Christian scholars also talk about peace from a Christian perspective.²⁵

In Zoroaster, the savior is mentioned by the name of Susyans and Susyant, and in Yasht 19, paragraph 88, in the description of the time of the savior's appearance, it is stated that:

At that time, when the dead will rise again and turn to the immortal living, then Susyant will come and renew the world to its desire... The bad nature will be defeated and the good nature will overcome it...²⁶

The final savior in the Jewish religion, the Messiah, is also depicted in this way in the Jewish Bible:

And a seedling will grow from the trunk of Jesus among the Israelites, a branch will bloom from its roots, that is, the savior on whom the people of Israel, Christ and the Spirit of God will be placed...²⁷

The concept of Mahdism and Messianic zeal is a canonical belief prevailing in Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and Muslims.

During the Safavid era, the presence of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Muslims enabled the concept of a Savior to emerge as a symbolic leader capable of forming coalitions and fostering solidarity among various groups. This was achieved within the framework of the Safavid political structure.²⁸ The Safavid kings, particularly

²⁵ Rashid, Ungaran, Fadzilah Din and Abdul Salam Muhamad Syukri, "The Concept of Peace in The Bible & The Qur'an," *Afkar Journal* 22(2) (2020), 241.

²⁶ William Glen and Henry Marten, *Holy Book*, trans. Fazel Hamedani (Tehran: Asatir, 2000), 116, chapter 12, verses 35 to 40.

²⁷ Glen and Marten, *Holy Book*, chapter 11, verses 1 to 10.

²⁸ Zahra Sadat Keshavarz and Maryam Saedyan Jazi, "Creating Chain of Equivalence, 32.

Shah Abbas I, promoted a vision of national solidarity that transcended religious law, ethnicity, and gender. As Della Valle described Shah Abbas I: "He is not only a good king but also a caring and kind father and guardian for his nation. He provides land and resources for his subjects and offers financial assistance to those in need."²⁹

One of the most notable achievements of the Safavid dynasty was the re-establishment of the nation-state after centuries of fragmentation. The disconnect between the governance structure and the broader concept of nationhood had previously led to divisions within society and a rift between the populace and the government. This disconnection stemmed from the prioritization of dynastic power over national sovereignty. However, despite its ethnic and dynastic identity, the Safavid regime sought to cultivate a sense of national solidarity.

The entry into the new political stage, under the important title of the nation-state, does not have a complete form and can always be proposed, discussed and compared in relation to its other types and varieties, at different historical periods and different territorial boundaries, but the Safavids, at least in the guise of an avant-garde and progressive structure in this field, have drawn some preliminary and general lines for this political structure to be worthy of the title of a nation-state. The specifics of this era in terms of politics cannot be introduced in accordance with modern genres and types of politics, but it can be considered, based on the considerations that will be raised below, as an initial plan of a nation-state or national state, the recent experience of which still has a relative continuity in the political scheme of Iran. In this respect, politics,

²⁹ Pietro Della Valle, *Les Fameux Voyages* (Paris: Gervais Clouvrier, 1664), 171–172.

according to Harold Lasswell's definition, is the science of studying the state.³⁰

The Safavid dynasty identified a unifying element within society: the belief in a Savior that encompassed all religions, ethnicities, groups, and classes. By leveraging this shared belief, the Safavid political structure became a means of fostering unity and solidarity among Iranians from diverse backgrounds. The concept of the Savior emerged as a powerful symbol that facilitated alliances and cohesion across the social spectrum, allowing for the establishment of national solidarity that transcended differences. This common belief in a Savior became a foundational aspect of Mahdism, serving as a functional element in promoting unity within the Safavid state.

b. Securing territorial integrity

The Ottomans in the west, north, and northwest, and the Uzbeks in the east and northeast, following the path of their predecessors in the plains of Central Asia, were among the most serious enemies who preferred the territorial boundaries of Iran at that time, with a different geography and nationality. The chaotic internal situation in terms of the type of rule had also exacerbated the long historical picture of Iran at risk of collapse. Basically, the neighbors' greed is also understandable from the point of view of incompetence in the country's administration. If the Safavids succeeded in maintaining territorial integrity and configuring the extremely complex concept of national solidarity against the Ottomans and the Uzbeks, they facilitated this by shaping the country's administrative system, which itself was subject to intellectual, social, and cultural-religious currents. Among these currents was the

³⁰ Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936), 269-271.

Imami Mahdism, which manifested itself as a national state.³¹

Despite these challenges, the Safavid dynasty successfully maintained territorial integrity and navigated the complex dynamics of national solidarity against both the Ottomans and Uzbeks. This achievement led to improvements in governance, which stimulated intellectual, social, and cultural-religious exchanges, with Imamiyyah Mahdism emerging as a symbol of the "national government."³²

In the period following the Ilkhanate and preceding the Safavid era, Iran experienced fragmentation due to numerous clans and dynasties, resulting in a feudal system. According to Romlu, Shah Ismail renewed the ancient territorial unity of Great Iran by eliminating the local powers that had coalesced into ten autonomous governments.³³ Romlu further elaborates:

During Shah-Abbas rolling, to establish a single government from the territory of the independent governments of the Qizilbash chiefs in Iran... the noble class, who boasted about their lineage and hereditary governments, became extinct, and respect and status were based on aptitude, diplomacy and competence.³⁴

Eskandar-Beig Munshi Torkaman, by resorting to an expression unique to the kings of ancient Iran's civilization,

³¹Ann Katharine Swynford Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory, The Jurists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 212.

³²Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam*, 212.

³³Hasan Bik Rumlu, *A Chronicle of the Early Safawis: Being the Ahsanu't-tawarikh of Hasan Rumlu*, trans. C. N. Seddon (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1931–1934), 1: 78.

³⁴Rumlu, *A Chronicle of the Early Safawis*, 121; Nasrullah Falsafi, *Zendegānī-ye shāh 'Abbās-e avval* (Tehran: s.n., 1975), 1: 121.

has applied the term Ultra Yazidi to the Safavid king and added that Ultra Yazidishines on his auspicious forehead.³⁵

The Safavid kings transformed Iran into the land of the Savior's emergence by promoting the idea that governance was intrinsically linked to the will of the Savior. In response to Sultan Selim I's threatening letters regarding the occupation of Iran, Shah Ismail concluded his correspondence with a verse that underscored the connection between Iran's territorial integrity and Shi'ism: "Those who confronted Ali's dynasty faced punishment in this domain."³⁶

Mahdism served as a vital mechanism for integrating Iran's national and civilizational identity with its religious and ritualistic practices, fostering a sense of unity. For instance, the convergence of Ashura, a significant national ritual, and Nowruz, the Persian New Year, exemplified the harmonious blend of these concepts and reflected Iran's national-religious unity. By declaring Shi'ism the country's official religion, the Safavid dynasty transformed it into a security asset, with Mahdism as its canonical symbol.³⁷ This established a clear distinction between Shi'ite Iran and its Sunni neighbors, the Ottomans and Uzbeks.

The proclamation of Shi'ism as the official state religion, with Mahdism as a central tenet, created social alignments with the Ottomans and Uzbeks. This alignment manifested in several ways: by embracing Twelver Shi'ism, centered on the twelfth Imam, known as the Mahdi, the Safavid rulers were able to connect politically, culturally, and socially with the Sunni Ottomans and Uzbeks. Furthermore, the declaration of Shi'ism emphasized the

³⁵ Nasrullah Falsafi, *Zendegānī-ye Shāh 'Abbās-e Avval*, 1:121.

³⁶ Abdul Hossein Navayi, *Shah Ismail Safavi: A Collection of Historical Documents and Correspondence with Detailed Notes* (Tehran: Arghavan, 1989), 168.

³⁷ Iskandar Beg Munshi Torkaman, *Tarikh-e-Alam Aray-e-Abbasi* (Tehran: s.n, 1971), 2: 829-830.

importance of the twelve Imams, particularly Imam Mahdi, as a means to foster socio-cultural cohesion among both Shi'ite and non-Shi'ite Iranians, ultimately reinforcing Iran's territorial integrity and the Mahdist vision.

According to Henry Corbin, one of the fundamental foundations of Shi'ism is Mahdism, or Mu'adism, which is considered one of its most canonical elements.³⁸ In their efforts to bridge the gap between the government and society, the Safavid rulers emphasized the collective belief in the Savior, thereby defining Iran's geographical boundaries in a national, cultural, and ideological context. These boundaries extended beyond mere physical geography, embodying a geostrategic framework rooted in social dynamics. This conceptual shift from geography to geopolitics reflects Shah Abbas's understanding of international relations. In this context, Della Valle notes that the king asked why the Spanish kings do not close the entrance to the Red Sea to the Turks.³⁹

c. The Transition from Absolute to Conditional Monarchy

In parallel with the aforementioned functions, a third type of function is identified for Mahdism, categorized as subject to attracting political participation of one of the primary social forces in the history of Iran's development, the clergy. Following the determination of Safavids in restoring Mahdism as a pillar of the governance structure, to improve their social base, and provide actors and agents like the scholars and jurists, the invited Shi'ite scholars from all over the Islamic nations to promote Mahdism became so intense that within a relatively short period a phenomenon similar to jurisprudential gatherings was formed in Iran, and Shi'ite scholars from all corners of Iran

³⁸ Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London & New York: Kegan Paul, 1993), 105.

³⁹ Valle, *Les Fameux Voyages*, 256.

joined each other.⁴⁰ In many areas, this issue can be considered a function of Mahdism because, based on such a recall and determination by the Safavid rulers, the expansion of Shi'ism in Iran was justified and explained by Mahdism jurisprudence.

Among the functions of the jurisprudential communities was the formation of scholars, the appointment of jurists to various positions of governance, and the delegation of judicial authority to them. This arrangement effectively made the monarchy conditional upon the clergy, a political shift often referred to as the transition from absolute to conditional monarchy. Consequently, governments that shared their authority with one or more influential religious institutions and derived their legitimacy from them transformed from absolute to relative monarchies.

In the process of shifting from tyranny to dictatorship (from absolute monarchy to conditional monarchy), the Safavid kings, due to their need for clerics as theorists of Mahdism, placed the endowment lands and the Suyurghals under clerical management.⁴¹

The structure of Safavid governance underwent significant reform, as it derived its legitimacy from the Shari'ah and the delegation of authority granted by prominent scholars of the lectionary. Positions were assigned with specific judicial capacities based on their scholarly standing. This restructuring aimed to promote and consolidate the doctrine of Mahdism, which persisted for an extended period. Shah Ismail II's approach can be

⁴⁰ Mohammad-Baqer Majlesi, *Ketāb al-Raj'at*, ed. Seyyed Hasan Mousavi (Qom: Dalil-e Ma, 2007), 27.

⁴¹ Roger Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 167; Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 39.

interpreted as a move toward constitutional governance. As researcher Karki notes, the king stated, "You lay my carpet, and my sitting here is by your consent and will to be the ruler."⁴²

A more radical example of this dynamic is Shah Tahmasab's decree, which labeled the Karki Mujtahids as unbelievers unfit to rule. According to Koleyni, this opposition to the *mujtahidān*, the guardians of the Shari'ah of Seyyed al-Mursalin, amounted to equating them with unbelievers.⁴³ When Mohaghegh Kirki visited the king in Qazvin, he remarked, "You deserve kingship more than I do because you are the vicegerent of the Imām, and I am one of your agents, ready to obey your commands."⁴⁴

While the actions of the Safavid rulers in transitioning from absolute to conditional power were undoubtedly inconvenient for autocratic rulers, they sought to undermine the Sufi Safavid dynasty following their defeat in the Chaldoran War. This effort aimed to diminish the connection between the spiritual leaders (the Safavid kings) and their followers. According to Qomi, Shah Tahmasab, by separating customary and religious guardianship, transferred part of his authority to jurists in his absence and promoted Mohaghegh Kirki to the rank of *mujtahid al-zamanī*.⁴⁵ In this context, Savory notes that the scholars were able to establish justice as a dominant

⁴² Mahmoud Ibn Hedayatullah Afvashteei Natanzi, *Neqavah al-Asar fi Zekr al-Khiyar fi Tarikh al-Safaviyah*, ed. Ehsan Eshraqi (Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi, 1994), 91-92.

⁴³ Mohammad Ibn Ya'qub Koleyni, *Al-Kafi*, ed. Ali-Akbar Ghaffari, (Tehran: Dar al-Kotob al-Eslamiyeh, 1986), 1:68, 7: 412.

⁴⁴ Muhammad Bāqir al-Khwansari, *Rawḍāt al-Jannāt fi Ahwāl al-'Ulamā' wa al-Sādāt* (Tehran: Maktabat Ismā'īliyyān, 1971), 4: 361.

⁴⁵ Qāḍī Aḥmad Qumī, *Khulāṣat al-Tawārīkh*, ed. Ihsān Ishrāqī (Tehran: s.n., 1984), 1: 238-240.

principle in the conduct of Safavid governance,⁴⁶ contributing to the control of existing power structures.

On the path from absolute to constitutional monarchy, the Safavid kings recognized the necessity of clerics as theorists of Mahdism and thus transferred the management of endowed (*waqf*) lands to them.⁴⁷

The political history of Iran is characterized by an absolute monarchy. Despite variations across different periods of governance, a common feature remains: the kings established absolute rule with no intention of sharing power with any social entity. In order to strengthen their rule and gain legitimacy, the Safavid rulers invited many scholars to Iran and appointed them to many positions.⁴⁸ The political behavior of the Safavid rulers reveals that the need to embrace Mahdism, due to its conceptual depth and orientation, led them to share power with the clerics, a recognized and influential force. Mahdism, as an ideological concept, has been theorized and represented by experts throughout history. Aware of this, the Safavid rulers invited scholars and jurists from across the Islamic world to gain legitimacy. They began to grant positions and powers to these scholars, effectively sharing authority with a significant social element.

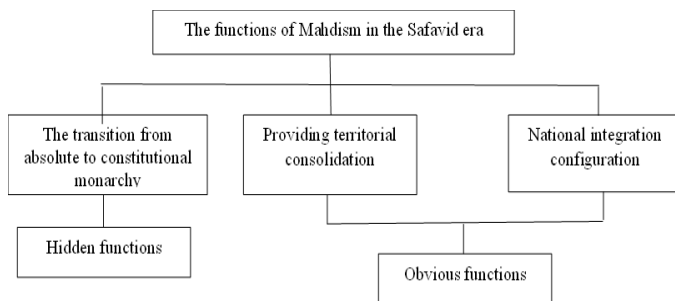
It can be inferred that the first two functions had direct and evident consequences, while the third function, as described by Merton, can be classified as hidden. This is due to its indirect, secondary nature and the potential for unplanned consequences regarding Mahdism during the Safavid era, which ultimately shaped the structure of Safavid governance without prior intention.

⁴⁶ Roger Savory, *Iran under the Safavids* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 90.

⁴⁷ Roger Savory, "Notes on the Safavid State," *Iranian Studies* 1(1) (1968)167; Edgar & Sedgwick, *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory*, 39.

⁴⁸ Roger Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 180.

Figure 3: The functions of Mahdism in the Safavid era



Source: Developed by the authors based on the findings of the present study

The Dysfunctional Aspects of Mahdism in the Safavid Era vs. Incurrence and Functional Unity

According to functionalist theory, the acceptance of a concept's functions inevitably leads to the emergence of potential dysfunctions. Merton, a prominent theorist, sought to reformulate and strengthen the concepts of incurrence and functional unity, aligning them with the necessary and general functions of phenomena as outlined in Durkheim’s theory. In doing so, he defended functionalism against criticisms of conservatism and lack of empirical support by introducing the concept of dysfunction to explain the complexities of functionalism in both terminological and analytical terms.

Building on this theoretical framework, the category of Mahdism during the Safavid era can be analyzed as a significant factor influencing the survival, continuity, and eventual decline of the political system. This analysis aims to confirm the generally attributed functions of the Safavid era in a broad sense while specifically assessing the promotion of Mahdism and its associated dysfunctions. These dysfunctions can be categorized as follows:

1. Fake Claimants: The emergence of individuals falsely claiming to be representatives or manifestations of Mahdism undermined the legitimacy of genuine religious authority.

2. False Legitimacy through the Re-establishment of Villeinage: The revival of feudal-like structures and practices created a façade of legitimacy that obscured the true nature of governance and authority.

3. Non-Hegemonic Dominance: The inability to establish a cohesive and dominant ideological framework around Mahdism led to fragmentation and weakened the overall authority of the Safavid regime.

By examining these dysfunctions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding Mahdism in the Safavid era and its impact on the political landscape.

a. Fake Claimants

One of the notable dysfunctions associated with the concept of Mahdism during the Safavid era, as well as in subsequent periods that emphasized Mahdism, was the emergence of fake claimants. These individuals presented themselves as the awaited savior or as his representatives and intermediaries. The core tenet of the Mahdism doctrine is the notion of the savior's absence, a concept that can be easily exploited by such claimants. This prolonged absence creates a sense of vacancy, even though the *Imām* is believed to be present and observing; his lack of visibility and direct connection to the temporal world opens the door for false claims.

The very nature of this phenomenon, particularly when the expectation of the savior's appearance is heightened, fosters an environment ripe for deception. As the emphasis on Mahdism grows, so does the number of individuals who make fraudulent claims. In this context, Sheybi notes, "Even the closeness of the religious leaders Nematullahi and Noorbakhshi to the Safavid family

influenced the disputes surrounding the Mahdism doctrine."⁴⁹

In a political structure where the king is viewed as a proxy or intermediary for the savior, even the claim to kingship can be seen as a false assertion. Ibn Khaldun observes that the concept of the vacancy of Mahdism has always been exploited as a cover for social movements that align with Mahdism.⁵⁰ The Safavid era was characterized by the promotion and protection of Mahdism, in sharp contrast to earlier periods that were fertile ground for impostors who presented themselves as the savior or his representatives, claiming the honors associated with such roles.

The dysfunction in this context extends beyond the actions of these fake claimants; it encompasses a broader spectrum of distorted and unconventional interpretations of Mahdism, often disregarding the implications of their success or failure.

b. Fake Legitimacy Through the Reestablishment of Villeinage

The legitimization of oppression and the justification of villeinage through the instrumental and ritualistic adoption of Mahdism represent significant dysfunctions within this framework. In a radical interpretation, one could argue that the first fake claimants were the Safavid rulers themselves, who asserted a connection between their governance and the Savior. For instance, Shah Ismail I occasionally claimed the title of Imam Mahdi, suggesting he held a position of greater authority. According to the account by Munshi Torkaman, Shah Ismail purportedly met Sahib al-Zaman,⁵¹

⁴⁹ Kamel Mostafa Sheybi, *Tasavvof va Tashayyo*, trans. Alireza Zekavati (Tehran: AmirKabir, 1979), 395.

⁵⁰ Abdul Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *Introduction (al-Muqaddimah)*, trans. Mohammad-Parvin Gonabadi (Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi, 1983), 1: 64.

⁵¹ Munshi Torkaman, *Tarikh-e-Alam Aray-e-Abbasi*, 1:46.

the savior, who wrapped a sword around the king's waist,⁵² and the king claimed to have received a prophecy from 'Ali regarding his impending victory in battle.⁵³ These narratives illustrate the Safavid rulers' pioneering role in making false claims.

Sheybi notes that Shah Ismail argued that one of the prophecies of Sheikh Zahed Gilani pertained to his devoted son-in-law and grandson, Sheikh Safi.⁵⁴ Over time, these prophecies became increasingly exaggerated, culminating in claims that the promised Mahdi himself had crowned Shah Ismail. According to Sheybi, it was on the basis of such insinuations that Ismail asserted his innocence, claiming there was no distance between himself and the Mahdi.⁵⁵

The legitimacy of the Safavid rulers can be analyzed in light of this initial dysfunction, the issue of fake claimants. The Safavids effectively positioned themselves as representatives of the Savior by leveraging public belief in Mahdism as a tool for legitimacy. This perception allowed certain scholars to conduct Friday prayers during the Age of Absence. Even prior to the establishment of Imamiyyah Mahdism, various pseudo-religious movements, such as the *Ghulāt*⁵⁶ (including Khorramdinan, Sabaiyyah, Nomaniiyyah, Khattabiyyah, Harufiyyah, Naqtawiiyyah, and Sufiyyah), adopted Mahdism as a cover to form ideological frameworks and socio-political movements that sought the official support of the existing government. Although Sufism held a governmental

⁵² Ibn Khaldun, *Introduction*, 1: 47.

⁵³ Ibn Khaldun, *Introduction*, 1: 50.

⁵⁴ Sheybi, *Tasavvof va Tashayyo*, 388.

⁵⁵ Sheybi, *Tasavvof va Tashayyo*, 389.

⁵⁶ The *ghulāt* were a branch of early Shī'ī Muslims. The term mainly refers to a wide variety of now extinct Shī'ī sects who were active in 8th–9th-century Kufa and who, despite their sometimes significant differences, shared a number of common ideas.

position, it lacked widespread popularity, as Sufis constituted a minority and did not enjoy broad public acceptance.

The legitimacy conferred upon the Safavid court was largely facilitated by the scholars of the time. However, the support of the 'ulama' was not inherently tied to the state structure, which was fraught with its own dysfunctions. Notably, scholars and jurists such as Mohaqeq Karki, Allameh Majlisi, and Sheikh Baha'i did not attribute the proxies of Imam Zaman to the Safavid rulers. Instead, their privileged social standing allowed them to support the expansion of Shi'ism and the affirmation of Mahdism through the Safavid regime. This support, whether intentional or not, contributed to the Safavids' legitimacy.

One unintended consequence of the legitimacy granted to the Safavid dynasty was the justification of an oppressive social structure. Despite their claims of proxy and connection to the government of Imam Zaman, the personal conduct of many Safavid rulers revealed their falsehood, thereby reinforcing the narrative of fake claimants. Chardin recalls Mulakazem, a religious figure who described Shah Abbas II as this drunkard and infidel king, unworthy of God's grace and deserving of death.⁵⁷ The extent of injustice and the villeinage system intensified to the point that Shah Ismail II was compelled to reconsider and adopt new policies. In this context, Qomi notes, the Shah ordered Nawab Mirzai and Mirza Shokrullah to hear cases in the court of justice for two days a week, addressing people's concerns and issuing written state certificates.⁵⁸

If the application of Mahdism during the Safavid era is viewed as a dysfunction stemming from rulers' instrumental misuse, it can be understood as a manipulation

⁵⁷ Jean Chardin, *Les Voyages*, ed. Langlès, L, (Paris: Le Normant, 1811), 8: 82.

⁵⁸ Qomi, *Khulāṣat al-Tawārīkh*, ed. Ihsan Ishraqi (Tehran: s.n., 1984), 2: 623-624.

of popular beliefs and sentiments to claim false legitimacy that justified their oppression. Consequently, this misuse emphasized the essence of Mahdism, rendering it dysfunctional as both an organism and a system in the social context.

c. Non-Hegemonic Dominance

The inability to reabsorb the *ghulāt*, Sufis and Qizilbash due to the non-hegemonic dominance of Imamiyyah Mahdism represents another significant dysfunction within this framework. In addition to the suppression of many Sufis and Qizilbash by certain Safavid rulers, there was a notable replacement of Qizilbash with Tajiks, Georgians, and Circassians. The clerical class sought to promote Shi'ism and stabilize Mahdism by sidelining the Sufis, thereby diminishing their influence within the political system.

This shift led to the disintegration of previously established power structures, with no new forces emerging to fill the political vacuum. According to Babayan, Shah Abbas I exploited the animosity of the *mujtahids* toward the extremist ideas of the *Ghulāt* as a pretext for their suppression,⁵⁹ which hindered the institutionalization of Imami Shi'ism. Although the decline of these powers began gradually in the latter half of Shah Ismail's reign, the *Ghulāt*'s extreme views regarding the Shah's divinity as a perfect mentor persisted. During Shah Tahmasb's rule, rebellion against the Safavid Shah's decrees was considered apostasy. However, Shah Tahmasb attempted to counter *Ghulāt* Shi'ism by recalling scholars from Jebel Amal and other Shi'ite regions to promote a more traditional *Fiqhī* (jurisprudential) Shi'ism.

This approach, along with similar measures taken by other Safavid rulers, posed a threat to the extremism of

⁵⁹ Kathryn Babayan, "The Safavid Synthesis: From Qizilbash Islam to Imami Shi'ism," *Iranian Studies* 27(1-4) (1964), 152.

Ghulāt Sufism. The decline of a significant force such as the Sufis, coupled with the failure to reintegrate them into the political framework, highlights a critical dysfunction in Imamiyyah Mahdism. In the context of political science, the maximum absorption of diverse forces is essential for the hegemony of political authority; thus, the inability to reabsorb these groups can be seen as a significant weakness within the Imamiyyah Mahdism framework.

In his texts about suppressing the *Ghulāt* during Shah Tahmasp's rule, Munshi Torkaman writes:

A few presumably loyal elites visited the King in his summer resort named Sorlogh. Improperly they told the King 'You are Mehdi'.... The King, a devoted Muslim, became angry and opened their skulls with a club. The religious and Sharia-loving king and a politician position as well, punished the ill-believing by crushing their heads by maul blow.⁶⁰

Afvashteei Natanzi notes that Shah Abbas I sought to diminish the power of the Qizilbash by first removing their leaders with the assistance of his chief supporter, Murshid Qali-Khan, and subsequently ordering the execution of Murshid Qali-Khan himself, thereby freeing himself from a significant burden.⁶¹ Qazvini further states that Shah Sultan Hossein dismissed the Qizilbash rulers and appointed pious Sādāt and Fozlā to govern the cities of Iran.⁶² Additionally, Shah Sultan Hossein established the Safic system, which became the guiding principle of the Safavid dynasty, under the direction of Mulla Mohammad Baqer Majlesi.⁶³

⁶⁰ Munshi Torkaman, *Tarikh-e-Alam Aray-e-Abbasi*, 1:117.

⁶¹ Afvashteei Natanzi, *Neqavah al-Asar fi Zekr al-Khiyar*, 290.

⁶² Mohammad-Taher Qazvini, *Abbasnameh*, ed. Ebrahim Dehgan, (Arak: Davoudi, 1950), 78.

⁶³ Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids*, 236-237; Hans Robert Roemer, "The Safavid Period," *The Cambridge History of Iran* 6 (1986), 308.

These repressive measures against the *Ghulāt*, along with the gradual replacement of Qizilbash with Tajiks and Georgians, led to the latter's diminishing influence in power. Subsequent Safavid kings made no attempts to reintegrate the Qizilbash into the political structure. The Qizilbash, in defiance of Khosrow-Khan Gorgy, a general under King Sultan Hossein, aided the Afghans in their military campaigns, as Gorgies and Circassians had supplanted the Qizilbash forces in the army.

Mahdism was exploited by both fake claimants and Safavid rulers, who, due to its inherent notion of absence, claimed to embody its just and virtuous principles. This manipulation resonated with Iranian society, which was shaped by distorted interpretations and false claims about Mahdism. While Mahdism has historically been used instrumentally by various groups and ideologies, the Safavid era presented unique challenges that contributed to its dysfunction, largely due to the government's strategic focus on it.

The collaboration between scholars and jurists with the Safavid regime can be understood as a response to the historical oppression of Shi'ites by pre-Safavid rulers. Karaki argued that if a mujahid enters an oppressive government, he executes the decree on behalf of Imam Zaman, not on behalf of the sultan, because the *Imām* is infallible and has appointed the jurist as his vicegerent.⁶⁴ This theory was supported by other prominent jurists, such as Sheikh Mofid, Sayyed Mortaza, and Sheikh Abu Salah Halabi,⁶⁵ who cooperated with the government and were recognized prior to Karaki's assertions.

⁶⁴ Ali ibn Hossein Karaki, *Jāmi' al-Maqāṣid fī Sharḥ al-Qawā'id* (Qom: Āl al-Bayt, 1993), 3: 489–490.

⁶⁵ Mohammad Ibn Nu'mān al-Baghdādī al-Mufīd, *al-Risālah fī al-Ghaybah*, ed. A'lā Āl Ja'far (Qom: al-Mu'tamar al-Mufīd, 1992), 812.

Aspects of the Mahdism Dysfunction vs. the Necessity of Function in the Safavid Era

The lack of effectiveness in improving and promoting governance serves as a lens through which the non-functioning aspects of Mahdism can be evaluated. During the decline and eventual collapse of the Safavid dynasty, it can be argued that the elements established by this dynasty, particularly the emphasis on Mahdism, did not enhance or promote their governance style, despite the legitimacy derived from their claims of proxy and connection to the Savior and the Age of Emergence, and effectively address the underlying issues of sovereignty, thereby failing to pave the way for overcoming systemic shortcomings. This inability to improve or upgrade governance ultimately rendered Mahdism dysfunctional.

Mahdism emerged from a complex political, social, and cultural structure that encompassed both functionalism and dysfunction. Its effectiveness was not only measured by the consequences it produced but also by its occasional ineffectiveness in relevant areas, particularly in terms of significantly improving and upgrading the governance style of the Safavid rulers. As Chardin notes regarding the ruling style of the Safavid kings:

Nothing can resist the crazy cravings of the kings, nor abstinence, competency, intimacy, etc. A word or a hint from their eyes can destroy the lives of the best servants and steemed relations, and this conduct by the king is not subject to any criminal justification.⁶⁶

If we assume that Mahdism represents an ideal form of governance at the emergence of the Savior, one would expect it to be highly effective in improving and promoting governance among those who regard Mahdism as a unique model. Consequently, the Safavid kings, due to their

⁶⁶ Chardin, *Les Voyages*, 8: 154-155.

emphasis on Mahdism, were influenced by its principles and endeavored to implement them in their governance. However, the evidence surrounding the gradual decline of Safavid rule leading to its eventual collapse suggests that Mahdism was largely ineffective.

Regarding this gradual downfall, Bedlisi notes that when the reign of the Safavid dynasty was in the hands of Shah Sultan Muhammad, and state power had diminished to the level of Qizilbash rule, chaos prevailed in the land of Ajam.⁶⁷ This decline, exacerbated by the dysfunction of Mahdism in governance, is further illustrated by the famine of 987 AH during Muhammad Khodabandeh's reign, as noted by Qomi:

One maund (6KG) of bread cost was three hundred dinars, and one hundred maunds of wheat were twenty-five thousand dinars, thus, the death of groups of around fifty or sixty, young and old, per day... Some people said that the barbecuers used to grill dead sheep, goat, and cow meat, causation for death.⁶⁸

Historian Savaqeb notes that the period following Shah Abbas I marked the beginning of the gradual decline of Safavid rule. This decline was catalyzed by the rebellion of Afghan leader Shir-Khan, which led to turmoil in Kandahar province, Ottoman attacks in the northwest, and initiated a ten-year war with the Ottomans, resulting in the loss of Baghdad and Mesopotamia from Safavid territory, culminating in the Treaty of Zahab.⁶⁹ Additionally, this

⁶⁷ Sharafkhan Bedlisi, *Sharafnameh*, ed. Mohammad Abbasi, (Tehran: Elmi, 1963), 376.

⁶⁸ Qomi, *Khulāṣat al-Tawārīkh*, 2: 701.

⁶⁹ Sahanbakhsh Savaqeb, "An Attitude on the Rebellion of Afghan Shir Khan in the Era of Shah Safi," *Faculty of Literature and Human Sciences* 40 (2005), 96–97.

period was characterized by inflation due to famine and the Cossacks' attacks on the Caspian coastal provinces.⁷⁰

According to Savory, a significant aspect of the Safavid dynasty's downfall was the weakened morale among military personnel, a consequence of years of neglect. The complement of this issue was the lack of reliable and experienced army commanders.⁷¹ This decline persisted for nearly half a century, ultimately leading to the final collapse of the Safavid dynasty.

It is important to emphasize that the lack of functionalism in Mahdism does not pertain to the overall improvement of historical governance; rather, it specifically relates to the principles of savior governance attributed to the Safavid dynasty.

Functionalist Analysis of Forces and Their Reactions in Relation to the Means and Objectives of Mahdism

From a functionalist perspective, Mahdism during the Safavid era can be understood as a phenomenon influenced by various forces within groups and individuals. Each of these forces interacted with the dysfunctions associated with Mahdism, responding in ways that reflected their unique positions and interests.

If the objective of Mahdism in the Safavid era was to create the conditions for the emergence of the Savior, a consistent theme throughout its discourse, then the means to achieve this objective can be traced to the principles of Imamiyyah Mahdism. Consequently, the five approaches mentioned earlier can be configured and analyzed in this context.

a. Conformity

The Safavid rulers played a significant role in recognizing Mahdism as a historical phenomenon and granting it a

⁷⁰ Qazvini, *Abbasnameh*, 75.

⁷¹ Savory, *Notes on the Safavid State*, 244.

privileged status in terms of its functional aspects. If the objective of this discourse was to create the conditions for the emergence of a Savior, and if the means, approaches, and resources were essential for the promotion and consolidation of Imamiyyah Mahdism, then the Safavid rulers can be considered key players in aligning with this goal and its mechanisms.

The validity of this analysis during the Safavid era, particularly concerning the institutionalization of Mahdism, is evidenced by the rulers' bold and dynamic efforts to establish the Shia sect as a foundational platform for promoting the idea of Mahdism throughout the nation. They achieved this by inviting scholars to elucidate and redefine the concept of Mahdism, delineating its boundaries and Shari'ah laws, with Mahdism serving as a central pillar. Additionally, they promoted savior-oriented literature for an extended period. Consequently, the rulers emerged as the primary forces in implementing the functional aspects of Mahdism by establishing, compiling, developing, and promoting its principles.

Alongside the Safavid rulers, prominent social forces, including clerics, jurists, mujtahids, and scholars of Jaafari jurisprudence, contributed to promoting Shi'ite Islam, particularly Mahdism, to levels of acceptance and stability necessary in Iran. This group falls into the category of conformity, as it played a crucial role in the continuity and evolution of Mahdism's functionalism, as well as its dysfunctions.

The cooperation between the Safavid rulers and the invited scholars from across the Islamic world was twofold, leading to mutual recognition of status. As Chardin noted, in Iran, the properties inherited by the kings were managed by the *Mujtahid* of the Khalsa, while another was

responsible for the welfare of the common people, known as the Mujtahid of the whole country.⁷²

These concepts limited the religious judgment and interpretation of numerous texts concerning Imam Mahdi and delegated the legitimacy of the monarchy to the Safavid rulers.⁷³

This phenomenon and the mutual understanding of Mahdism led to the acceptance of positions and the implementation of Shari'ah limits to promote Imami Mahdism. Concurrently, while cooperating in this context of conformity, the clerics confronted Sufism and the Mahdism espoused by the *Ghulāt*, producing literature on these themes. They also authored works addressing false claimants to leadership. In the broader history of Shi'ism, Tehrani asserts that the clerics and jurists have always fought against false claimants by writing various books that affirm the essence of Imamate and the concept of Imam al-Zaman's absence.⁷⁴

Historians such as Sheikh Saduq,⁷⁵ Sheikh Tusi,⁷⁶ and No'mani,⁷⁷ through their narratives, affirmed their support for Imamiyyah Mahdism and played a crucial role in validating both the goals of Mahdism and the means to achieve them. These historians recognized their association with the Safavid rulers as the founders of the Mahdism discourse.⁷⁸ Most historians of the time aligned with the

⁷² Chardin, *Les Voyages*, 3: 241.

⁷³ Mirza al-Isfahani, *Riyāḍ al-'Ulamā' wa Ḥiyāḍ al-Fuḍalā'* (Qom: s.n., 1980), 5:159.

⁷⁴ Aqa-Bozorg Tehrani, *al-Dharī'ah ilā Taṣānīf al-Shī'ah* (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwā', 1982), 319–342.

⁷⁵ Muhammad ibn 'Alī Ṣadūq, *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Ni'mah*, ed. 'Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Qom: Jāmi'at al-Mudarrisīn, 1984), 66.

⁷⁶ Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan Ṭūsī, *al-Ghaybah* (Qom: Dār al-Ma'ārif al-Islāmiyyah, 1990) 28.

⁷⁷ Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm Nu'mānī, *al-Ghaybah*, trans. Sayyid Aḥmad Fakhri Zanjānī (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1983), 54.

⁷⁸ Tehrani, *al-Dharī'ah ilā Taṣānīf al-Shī'ah*, 74-83.

objectives and means of Mahdism, reproducing its concepts and promoting the idea of the rulers' connection to the Mahdi. This alignment helped to solidify the high status of the Safavid rulers and reinforced their legitimacy in maintaining territorial integrity against external threats.

In this context, Eskandar-beig Monshi proclaimed that the king is the shadow of God on Earth, expressing hope that Shah Abbas' court would be connected to the emergence of Sahib al-Amar. This hope became a prominent theme reflected in many chronicles of the era, including *Summary of al-Tavarikh, Alam Arai Abbasi, Alam Ara-ye-Safavi, Tarikh-e-Jahan-Ara, and Taklamat al-Akhbar*.⁷⁹

Additionally, proponents of Savior-oriented poetry contributed to the promotion of Imamiyyah Mahdism by fostering the idea of anticipation and belief in the Savior within everyday social life. Through storytelling and self-portraits, they transformed this idea into a concrete belief that fostered national solidarity and maintained territorial integrity. Their works stirred the population's emotions and enthusiasm for national and territorial matters.

One notable poet from the Shah Tahmasab period, 'Abdi-Beig Shirazi, captures this sentiment in his writings:

You the Mighty positioned the king to govern
Please keep him victorious until Mahdi's arrival
Led Mahdi appear during his ruling
Establish Mahdism during his ruling⁸⁰
You the king that believes in the Prophet
You the first devotee of Shi'ism
You will allow us to visit Mehdi
You have gathered Mehdis' army⁸¹

⁷⁹ Munshi Torkaman, *Tarikh-e-Alam Aray-e-Abbasi*, 1: 230.

⁸⁰ 'Abdi-Beig Shirazi, *Dohat al-Azhar* (Moscow: Danesh, 1979), 150.

⁸¹ 'Abdi-Beig Shirazi, *Mazhar al-Asrar*, ed. Abulfazl HashemUghli Rahimov (Moscow: Danesh, 1986), 191.

At this stage, it can be deduced that these four effective social forces have been placed in the category of followers due to their agreement with and conformity to the concept of Imami Mahdism and its materialization through the provided means, according to the theoretical background. The implicit meaning here is that these four forces were involved in the emergence and expansion of the three canonical aspects of Imamiyyah Mahdism: national solidarity, territorial integrity, and the transition from autocracy to dictatorship (conditional monarchy), as well as the constituent forces corresponding to functionalism, dysfunction, and non-function.

b. Innovation

One of the influential groups in initiating and extending dysfunction in the Imamiyyah Mahdism aspect is the *Ghulāt* Mahdism followers. Based on the proposed theoretical concepts, this group accepted the goals but sought to establish and invent its customized mechanisms and means. As to time, their precedence in Mahdism is inevitable, but in terms of shared opinion on the goal and disagreements on the approaches, *Ghulāt* were the innovators. The interpretation of innovation is far from being interpreted as an adjectival predicative methodical, but is defined in connection with new approaches in materializing the goals, regardless of valuing them, because Imami Mahdism was a historical concept even before the Safavid era, whereas *Ghulāt's* approach was a new practice.

Regarding the goals of Mahdism, both groups shared a common doctrine but diverged significantly on the mechanisms for achieving them. The *Ghulāt's* approach was characterized by radicalism and extremism, which became central to their interpretation of Imamiyyah Mahdism. This radicalism not only influenced their beliefs but also contributed to dysfunction in integrating social

forces, such as the *Ghulāt*, and addressing the governance challenges of the era.

The *Ghulāt*'s extreme approach can be understood as a political-religious movement that emerged prior to the Safavid era, manifesting in various sects such as the Saba'iyya, Khattabiya, No'maniyya, 'Albaeiyya, and Kamaliya. In terms of content, these groups exhibited exaggerated characteristics and virtues attributed to the *Imāms*.⁸² The divisions among these factions prompted the Imamiyyah to seek convergence through the lens of Mahdism while simultaneously prohibiting Shi'ites from exaggerating the status of the *Imāms*.⁸³ According to Khonji, the *sheikhs* and caliphs of the Bektashi order believed that the spirit of wisdom descended from God to the Prophet Muhammad, then to Imam 'Ali, followed by the other *Imāms*, and ultimately to Sheikh Haydar and Shah Ismail. Consequently, the *Ghulāt* came to worship Shah Ismail.⁸⁴

In the pursuit of realizing the goals of Mahdism, this ideological gap compelled Shi'ite scholars to refute the claims of these groups.⁸⁵ Modarresi Tabatabayi and Esma'ili labeled them as destructive people with high arrogance.⁸⁶ Overall, Mahdism paved the way for the formation and continuation of *Ghulāt* movements

⁸² Abū al-Fath Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahraṣṭānī, *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, ed. Muḥammad Riḍā Jalālī (Tehran: Taban, 1983), 230–250.

⁸³ Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan Tūsī, *Tahdhīb al-Aḥkām*, ed. 'Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Tehran: Ṣadūq, 1995), 6: 105.

⁸⁴ Faḍl Allāh ibn Rūzbahān Khunjī Iṣfahānī, *Tārīkh-i 'Ālam-ārā-yi Amīnī*, ed. Muḥammad Akbar 'Āshiq (Tehran: Mūrāth-i Maktūb, 2003), 192.

⁸⁵ Tehrani, *al-Dharī'ah ilā Taṣānīf al-Shī'ah*, 221.

⁸⁶ Sayed Hossein Modarresi Tabataba'i, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam*, trans. Hashem Izadpanah (Tehran: Kavir, 2007), 64.

characterized by literalism and ostentation.⁸⁷ The presence of literalism in Asia Minor contributed to the emergence of a hybrid ideology that combined Shi'ite, Safavid, and *Ghulāt* elements under the Mahdavi slogan, ultimately leading to a form of millenarianism.

c. Ritualism

Safavid scholars and the court elite were crucial forces aligned with the goals and means of Mahdism. However, their positions were often contradictory, as their actions regarding Mahdism led to various dysfunctions while simultaneously promoting and intensifying ritualistic practices.

The Safavid kings, each acting at their discretion, often abandoned the core goals of Imamiyyah Mahdism, resorting instead to a ritualistic interpretation of it. They enforced conversions to Shi'ism as a primary means of establishing Mahdism. This coercion resulted in dysfunctions such as non-hegemonic legitimization and a lack of genuine acceptance among various groups, including Sufis and *Ghulāt*.

It has been argued that the Safavid kings were among the administrators of ritualism, thus acting as agents of dysfunction within Mahdism. They employed an instrumental belief in the proxy idea, linking the Safavid dynasty to the concept of a Savior. However, their actions did not align with the ideals of a just and pious government; instead, they imposed these concepts as tools for self-legitimization and demagoguery. A notable example of this is Shah Tahmasp's⁸⁸ order to construct a mansion for Imam

⁸⁷ Sheybi, *Tasavvof va Tashayyo*, 350–360; Mahboubeh Esma'ili and Nozhat Ahmadi, "Analysis of the Discourse of Mahdism in the Era of Shah Ismail and Shah Tahmasab," *History of Islam* 5(20) (2015), 5–35.

⁸⁸ Tahmāsp I, *Shah of Iran, The Memoirs of Shah Tahmasp I: Safavid Ruler of Iran*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2024), 56–58.

Zaman. An extreme instance of this behavior was Shah Tahmasp's decision to withhold his sister from marriage, intending for her to wed Imam Zaman, which exemplified ritualism while neglecting the true goals of Mahdism.⁸⁹

To promote Shi'ism, during the reign of Shah Abbas I and afterward, groups of mourners gathered on Ashura day around the tombs⁹⁰ of the Safavid kings and in the main squares of cities⁹¹ to perform grieving rites.⁹² Under King Suleiman, ten days of mourning rituals were held in public squares, main streets, and intersections, culminating on Ashura.⁹³ During Shah Safi's reign, new mourning practices were introduced, including stoning, bleeding, and padlocking.⁹⁴

These ritualistic measures were inevitable, even though the Safavid rulers did not fully adhere to the Monji way of life. Regarding the ostentatious and instrumental nature of these rituals, Kaempfer noted that the respect shown to the Savior by the Safavid kings appeared superficial and perfunctory; the kings feared potential backlash from their religious followers, which prevented them from disregarding canonical religious principles.⁹⁵

Despite the religious obligations of Shi'ism being more limited than those of Sunnism, the rites and rituals of Shi'ism during the Safavid dynasty surpassed those of

⁸⁹ Robbi Benjamin Tatili et al., *Travelogue*, trans. Hasan Javadi and William Flore (Tehran: Dr. Mahmoud Afshar, 2014), 217.

⁹⁰ Adam Olearius, *Travelogue*, trans. Ahmad Behpour, (Tehran: Ebtekar, 1984), 488.

⁹¹ García de Silva Figueroa, *Travelogue*, trans. Gholamreza Samī'ī (Tehran: Nashr-e No, 1984), 311.

⁹² Valle, *Les Fameux Voyages*, 71.

⁹³ Engelbert Kaempfer, *Amoenitatum Exoticarum, Fasciculi V: Variae Relationes, Observationes et Descriptiones Rerum Persicarum* (Lemgo: s.n., 1712), 180–181; Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les Six Voyages de Jean-Baptiste Tavernier: en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes* (Paris: 1676), 88.

⁹⁴ Olearius, *Travelogue*, 488.

⁹⁵ Kaempfer, *Amoenitatum Exoticarum*, 122-124.

Sunnism. To avoid punishment, scholars aligned themselves with the Safavid rulers, establishing the jurisprudential foundations of the government while inadvertently fueling the dysfunction of Mahdism, particularly the emergence of false claimants. Although they issued numerous statements and refutations regarding these claimants, the ineffectiveness of their efforts underscores the seriousness of the dysfunctions.⁹⁶ The delegation of legitimacy to the Safavid rulers extended beyond the dynasty's power. According to Khonji, Allameh Majlesi, a prominent scholar of the era, guaranteed the legitimacy of one of the most incompetent rulers in Iranian history, Shah Sultan Hossein, and delegated authority to him on behalf of Imam Zaman.⁹⁷

While jurists and scholars did not authorize the direct representation of the rulers and introduced the Mujahids as enforcers of divine decrees, they sometimes, like Sheikh Bahai, acknowledged oppressive governance as permissible. The same level of empathy, companionship, and authority granted to the Safavid court, along with the delegation of power based on Shari'ah, provided a foundation for adopting Mahdism as a tool in connection with the proxy idea. This indirectly contributed to the promotion of dysfunction within the movement. This phenomenon indicates that the Safavid rulers were, in essence, false claimants who asserted their connection to the Savior.

d. Rebellions

According to Merton's theoretical concepts, certain forces involved in dysfunction reject both the means and goals of established movements. These groups exploited prevailing

⁹⁶ Jean Calmard, *Shiei Ritual and Power, Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1996), 141.

⁹⁷ Khonji Esfahani, *Tarikh-e-Alam Ara-ye-Amini*, 235.

societal superstitions to gain strength, neither accepting the objectives of Mahdism nor the methods for achieving them. Instead, they sought to establish their own goals and promote their own means. Their primary aim was to acquire personal power while fostering superstition.

By adhering to this doctrine in opposition to the common goals and means of Mahdism, these groups contributed to the movement's dysfunction by instilling skepticism and mistrust among its adherents. In this context, Babayan discusses the Nuqtavi rebellions during the reign of Shah Abbas I, noting that they were caused by the exalted attitude of Sufism, which led to the emergence of religious-political movements and awakened the central government's concerns.⁹⁸

e. Isolationism

Imamiyyah Mahdism encompasses three parameters: functionalism, dysfunction, and non-function. The non-function parameter refers to the inherent inefficiencies in the concept of Imamiyyah Mahdism, a significant phenomenon during the Safavid era. This inefficiency was largely inevitable, as the forces associated with non-function were often unique to the isolated and marginalized groups within society.

The Sufis, who were primary and influential sources of support for the Safavid rule, played a crucial role in the establishment of Imamiyyah Mahdism. However, as this movement became integral to the monarchy's structure, it also led to a degree of isolation. This isolation may have contributed to the eventual collapse of the Safavid dynasty.

The Safavid rulers adhered to their own interests and maintained a relatively favorable governance system rooted in the piety associated with Sufism. While the Safavid period was significantly supported by Sufism, the Qizilbash, who provided military backing, played a lesser

⁹⁸ Babayan, "The Safavid Synthesis", 154-155.

role. Regarding isolationism, Lambton notes, Shah Tahmasp dismissed the Qizilbash Turks from the core and scattered them.⁹⁹ This action was a consequence of the Safavids' transition from Sufi and *Ghulāt* Shi'ism to Jurisprudential Shi'ism, prompted by the emergence of Imamiyyah Mahdism. Roemer observes that this transition was primarily an attempt to diminish the influence of the Qizilbash princes,¹⁰⁰ while Newman attributes it to the Ahl al-Bayt (including Hazrat Mahdi) and the Sufi legacy, which together formed a new theme of political-religious governance.¹⁰¹

The *Ghulāt* also adopted isolationist practices, rendering them ineffective within the Safavid governance structure. Munshi Torkaman describes them as headless Qalandrans and Bangi Loutians,¹⁰² highlighting their marginalization.

Conclusion

This study critically examines the phenomenon of Mahdism during the Safavid era, moving beyond the prevailing one-sided narratives that often confirm and sanctify its significance. By assessing both the functional and dysfunctional dimensions of Mahdism, this analysis reveals a more nuanced understanding of its role in Safavid society.

The findings indicate that Mahdism served three primary functions during this period: (1) fostering national solidarity, (2) ensuring territorial integrity, and (3) facilitating the transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. Mahdism provided a unifying

⁹⁹ Ann Katharine Swynford Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (London: London Oriental Series, 1981), 215.

¹⁰⁰ Roemer, "The Safavid Period", 327-330.

¹⁰¹ Andrew J. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2006), 34-35.

¹⁰² Munshi Torkaman, *Tarikh-e-Alam Aray-e-Abbasi*, 1: 117.

framework that promoted national convergence around the concept of the Savior, appealing to a broad spectrum of Muslim sects in Safavid Iran. This integration sought to transcend cultural, religious, and ethnic differences, thereby uniting society as a whole. Furthermore, Mahdism established a clear demarcation between Shi'ite and Mahdavi Iran and their Ottoman and Uzbek counterparts, thereby enhancing territorial integrity on both geophysical and geopolitical levels. Additionally, Mahdism's reliance on jurisprudential scholars compelled the Safavid rulers to cede some of their authority to the clergy, laying the groundwork for significant social transactions.

However, the study also identifies several dysfunctions associated with Mahdism. These dysfunctions contributed to the emergence of false claimants, the establishment of a villeinage system, and a non-hegemonic authority that was unable to reintegrate various social forces. The absence of a physical savior during the Safavid era, when Mahdism became a dominant cultural concept, inevitably led to the rise of false claimants who positioned themselves as saviors. This phenomenon was exacerbated by heretical interpretations of Mahdism, which facilitated the exploitation of the concept by these claimants.

Another significant dysfunction arose from the legitimacy that scholars and jurists conferred upon the Safavid rulers, portraying them as proxies of Imam Zaman. This assignment of legitimacy, which paralleled the jurisprudential endorsement of the Safavid regime, provided a justification for the emergence of the villeinage system and the oppressive rule of the Safavid dynasty. Additionally, the establishment of Imamiyyah Mahdism led to the marginalization of certain social forces, such as the Sufis and Qizilbash, because of their association with *Ghulāt* Mahdism. Efforts were made to reintegrate these groups into the governing system, but their suppression highlighted the limitations of Mahdism's inclusivity.

The primary non-functional aspect of Mahdism is closely linked to the Safavid rulers' style of governance. While Imami Mahdism was a central feature of the Safavid claim to legitimacy, the lack of substantial evidence regarding improvements in governance practices suggests that Mahdism had limited influence on the effectiveness and enhancement of Safavid rule. Given the multiplicity of dysfunctions and non-functions identified, Merton's theory indicates a predominance of dysfunction over function.

Applying Merton's typology, this study identifies five social forces that shaped Safavid Mahdism. Conformists, including kings, clerics, and historians, accepted both the goals and means of Mahdism, thereby forming the ideological backbone of the state. Innovators (the *Ghulāt*) accepted the goals but rejected conventional means. Ritualists (certain kings and clerics) adhered to the means while losing sight of the broader goals. Rebels (false claimants) rejected both goals and means, subverting Mahdism from within. Isolationists (the Sufis) accepted the spiritual goals but rejected worldly means. This categorization reveals Mahdism as a contested concept in which dysfunctional adaptations, particularly among innovators, rebels, and isolationists, predominated over functional ones, thereby challenging traditional celebratory narratives.

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