Thieves of Religion
Pathology of Religion and Religiosity

Mostafa Delshad Tehrani

University faculty member and Islamic author

Sept. 2018

***Abstract**: Nahj al-Balaghah is a book of teachings of Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib which was compiled by Sharif Radi (400 A.H.). Since then, it has been a source to know true Islam, in the best possible way as he was the closest companion of the Prophet.*

Dr. Mostafa Delshad, along with teaching at university, has more than 20 years of experience in researching about topics related to Nahj al-Balaghah. He has written around 30 books in this topic so far. The present article is dealing with religious pathology and religiosity in Nahj al-Balaghah.

Key words: religion, religiosity, Nahj al-Balaghah

Religion is the most beautiful manifestation of Mercy of God to guide human beings and religiosity is the way to approach this Mercy and to mov in the way of Guidance. Imam 'Ali in a tactful teaching about Islam said, "Truly this Islam is the religion of God which God chose it for Himself and developed it by His blessing. He appointed his best creature responsible of transferring it to

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

people and established its principle based on His friendship."

The Mercy of God is manifested in everything sent down which is to guide people by the hand of the best of His servants. The goal of religion is that human beings embellish themselves by God's attributes and is to live an ethical life and to manifest virtues that human beings deserve to attain.

In this way we continuously face thieves who are like pests of religion and religiosity, which we need to know them and pay attention to them.

If the religion can not be perceived truly and can not be manifested in people, the route of religion and religiosity will be altered and harms will surround religiosity from all sides.

Appearance of various harms in religion and religiosity causes religion can not play its role as it is expected, so injured religiosity will result in behaviors and actions which have no relationship with the truth of religion. Therefore, true perception of religion (according to which should be the soul of religion and its goals and directions) and religiosity are the most significant aspects which should be noticed.

The Truth of Religion

Religion is an elevated truth and due to this is above and immune from any harm.

In God's actions no error, mistake, harm or shortcoming can exist. Errors and mistakes are for human beings; any shortcomings introduced in the realm of pathology of religion does not return to the religion per.se, but it refers to how people approach religion, their perception of it, their religious understanding and their religiosity type. These issues are continuously the subjects of discord and harms.

Various Perception of Religion and Potentiality of Mistakes in Religious Perception

People's understanding of religion is different and necessarily every type of religious understanding is not compatible with the soul of religion, its goals and orientation. It can be realized from the teachings of imam 'Ali there are various recognition of religion: ignorant understanding, elites understanding, emotional understanding.

Ignorant perception of religion is the ground for misunderstandings, and root of harms. Imam 'Ali while sending 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas to talk to khavarij, pointed out to this and said,

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

لا تخاصمهم بالقران، فان القرآن حمال ذو وجوه، تقول و يقولون، و لكن حاججهم بالسنة، فانهم لن يجدوا عنها محيصا."[1]

Do not support your words by Quran, as it can be interpreted in different ways. You say something from Quran and they say something else. Talk with them by Sunnah which they have no alternative and they accept it.

Khavarij by their shallow understanding of religion and dogmatic perception of Quran was on the wrong track ending up in destruction. They assumed their understanding flawless and regarded imam ‘Ali as Kafir (disbeliever). They advised others to hate ‘Ali. Imam ‘Ali in his advice to ibn ‘Abbas mentioned that Quran can be interpreted differently so the perception can be various. Khavarij took the wrong perception which caused vulnerability of religion.

‘Ali said in this regard,

فَإِنْ أَبَيْتُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ تَزْعُمُوا أَنِّي أَخْطَأْتُ وَ ضَلَلْتُ، فَلِمَ تُضَلِّلُونَ عَامَّةَ أُمَّةِ مُحَمَّدٍ (صلى الله عليه وآله) بِضَلَالِي وَ تَأْخُذُونَهُمْ بِخَطَئِي وَ تُكَفِّرُونَهُمْ بِذُنُوبِي؟ سُيُوفُكُمْ عَلَى عَوَاتِقِكُمْ تَضَعُونَهَا مَوَاضِعَ الْبُرْءِ وَ السُّقْمِ وَ تَخْلِطُونَ مَنْ أَذْنَبَ بِمَنْ لَمْ يُذْنِبْ![2]

If you do not accept this claim I am in wrong way but why because of my aberration you know all Muhammad’s nation abberant? And includes them in my mistake and consider them kafir because of my sins?! Your swords on your shoulder, you take them down on innocent ones and sinful ones.

This unfortunatly is what which becomes clear after injuries inflicted to religion; in that time, its importance becomes clear.

Realms of Religion and Religiosity

Religion is a collection of theoretical and practical points which is planned to be realized in the society by three indicators of faith, piety and benevolence, then ethical life can blossom in all its aspects, preparing the ground for human beings growth.

Religiosity also includes both the practical side and theoretical side, which can embrace thought, belief and religious faith, and is confession, intentions, religious behavior and manner. ‘Ali in his Hikmah said,

الايمان معرفة بالقلب و اقرار باللسان و عمل بالاركان.[3]

These aspects, i.e. thought, knowledge, religious faith and belief, and confession, intention, religious manner and behavior all can be exposed to harm. It is necessary that all these aspects are being reviewed continuously and organized in support of the soul of the religion.

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

The Meaning of Harm to Religion and Religiosity

Harm and injuries in these issues mean appearance of a shortcoming or flaw, transforming from normal shape, gradual turn to diclination. As imam ‘Ali discussed this in his speeches a lot:

الشک یفسد الدین[4]

“*Doubt corrupts religion*.”

آفة الدین سوء الظن[5]

“*The pest of religiosity is to distrust God.”*

سبب فساد الدین الهوی[6]

“*The cause of ruining religion is the lusts*.”

غلبة الهوی تفسد الدین[7]

“*Obsessing with lusts will ruin religion*.”

فساد الدین الدنیا.

“*The destruction of religion is in obsessing with worldly life*.”

طاعة الشهوة تفسد الدین[8]

“*Obedience of lusts will ruin religion*.”

لا یسلم الدین مع الطمع.

“*Religion will remain safe besides greed*.”

فساد الدین الطمع.[9]

“*Ruination of religion is by greed*.”

کثرة الکذب تفسد الدین.[10]

“*Frequent lies ruin religion*.”

دَعِ الحسد و الکذب و الحقد فانهن ثلاثة تشین الدین.[11]

“*Leave jelousy, grudge, lies; these are three characteristics that harm religion*.”

Pathology of Religion and Religiosity

Pathology of religion and religiosity is the study of mentioned concepts theoretic-wise and religious-wise. For example, misunderstanding of ascetic in religion will cause human beings’ exiting from normal life style and falling into the abyss of extremes. The words of ‘Ali (a) with ‘Ala’, the son of Ziyad Harithi and his brother ‘Asim is representative of this issue. His holiness ‘Ali went to ‘Ala’s home, who was of his friends, to visit him.

When he saw his very big home said,

مَا كُنْتَ تَصْنَعُ بِسِعَةِ هَذِهِ اَلدَّارِ فِي اَلدُّنْيَا - وَ أَنْتَ إِلَيْهَا فِي اَلْآخِرَةِ كُنْتَ أَحْوَجَ وَ بَلَى إِنْ شِئْتَ بَلَغْتَ بِهَا اَلْآخِرَةَ تَقْرِي فِيهَا اَلضَّيْفَ وَ تَصِلُ فِيهَا اَلرَّحِمَ وَ تُطْلِعُ مِنْهَا اَلْحُقُوقَ مَطَالِعَهَا فَإِذاً أَنْتَ قَدْ بَلَغْتَ بِهَا اَلْآخِرَةَ[12] .

“*What is the benefit of such a big home for you in the world while you need it in hereafter more? Of course,*

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

if you want, you can gain a home in hereafter by this very house if you feed your guests there, hospitalize your relatives there and pay whatever of rights you should pay. In this way, you also make your home in hereafter."

'Ala' said, "Oh, Ali! I complain of my brother 'Asim ibn Ziyad to you." He said, "What's wrong with him?" he answered, "he is wearing a woolen clothes on and forgets life." 'Ali said, "Take him here."

When he went there, Imam told him,

"يا عدى نفسه! لقد استهام بک الخبيث! أما رحمت أهلک و ولدک! أترى الله أحل لک الطيبات، و هو يکره أن تاخذها! أنت أهون على الله من ذلک!"[13]

"*Oh! You the valueless enemy of you! Satan makes you puzzled and misguided you! Do not you have mercy on your wife and children? Do you think that God makes good things Halal for you but He is not satisfied if you use them? You are lower that what you think in front of God*!"

'Asim said, "Oh Amirul Mumenin Ali! You yourself wear rough clothes and eat bad food!" imam answered,

"ويحک! انى لست كانت. ان الله تعالى فرض على أئمة العدل أن يقدروا أنفسهم بضعفة الناس، كيلا يتبيغ بالفقير فقره!"[14]

"*Wo unto you! What are our similarities? God has obliged on Just rulers to live a life similar to the poorest people of their society so as not to make any poor person of their society sad*."

Levels and Aspects of Pathology of Religion and Religiosity

Harm to religion as it has been mentioned has various levels and aspects, we can outline the following aspects for it:

a. Lack of deep understanding of religion and religious life
b. Misunderstanding of religious concepts
c. Attenuation of religious beliefs and behavior
d. Weakening the ethical foundations
e. Discrediting religious values
f. Losing faith in religion and religious affairs
g. Infidelity
h. Not caring for religious rules
i. Escaping from each religious topic

Sometimes, religious pathology and religiosity equals lack of deep

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

understanding of religion and obsessing yourself with superficial issues; if religion is not understood deeply, will comes up with shortcomings and it loses its true identity. And sometimes distorting religious concepts and incorrect perception of them change the religion and religiosity from its normal and inborn state into fake identity. And sometimes noticing the causes of weakness of beliefs and religious behaviors, and appearance of weakness in ethical foundations or ignorance of religious values will result in each of these harms which is a pest in thought, cognition, faith and religious faith and also religious thought, behavior and life style.

The necessity of pathology of Religion and religiosity

Dealing with **pathology of Religion** and religiosity is in fact taking care of religious health and religiosity. This issue is not less important than health of body and soul, but as religion and religiosity are dealing with the truth of humanity and his various aspects of life and has a determining role in it, the crisis of religion and religiosity harms can be devastating and can result in social and political crisis, breaking the boarders of personal privacy and finally human beings' lack of identity. In the great words of 'Ali, we read,

المصيبة بالدين أَعظم المصيبات."[15]

"The greatest and the most significant harms is the harm to religion."

Because of harming religion and religiosity, personal privacies and social borders will shake and evils will come into life, as 'Ali (a.s) said,

" الخيانة دليل على قلة الورع و عدم الديانة."[16]

"*Betrayal is the cause of less piety and lack of faith*."

Lack of religiosity is a factor which causes appearance of betrayal in different affairs. As imam 'Ali said, it is a fortress sheltering human beings:

اِجعل الدين كهفک

"*Know religion as your safeguard*."

If religion is sound, it can protect us in the best way, guide us to the right path, and save us. In the words of 'Ali we read,

سبب الورع صحة الدين[17]

"*The cause of fear is sound of religiosity*."

الوفاء عنوان وفور الدين

"*To be loyal is the sign of profound religiosity*."

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

The more soundness of religion, the more human being's health and power, as Ali (a.) has pointed out to it and said,

صيانة المرء على قدر ديانته.[18]

"*Abstinence of a human being from sins is equal to his religiosity*."

By breaching religious privacies, all things of human beings will be subject to harms, as imam 'Ali said in a sermon where he is expressing his wonder of harms penetrating in muslims' religion and its outcomes, he said,[19]

فيا عجبا! و مالى لا اعجب من خطا هذه الفرق على اختلاف حججها فى دينا لا يقتصون اثر نبى و لا يقتدون بعمل وصى و لا يومنون بغيب و لا يعفون عن عيب، يعملون فى الشبهات ويسيرون فى الشهوات، المعروف فيهم ما عرفوا و المنكر عندهم ما انكروا مفزعهم فى المعضلات الى انفسهم و تعويلهم فى المهمات على آرائهم كان كل امرى ء منهم امام نفسه، قد أخذ منها فيما يرى بعرى ثقات، و أسباب محكمات.[20]

"*How surprising! And why I should not be surprised from the mistakes of sects with their claims in religion! They do not obey any prophet, and they do not follow any successor of the prophet. They do not believe in unseen nor leave evils. They tread on the way of doubts, follow lusts, good deeds are what they know good and bad are what they themselves judge as bad. In problems they take refugee in their own thoughts and while facing doubts, they rely on their own ideas. It seems each one of them is an imam for himself and assumes themselves as the strongest ropes and the most stable tools*."

Health in Religion and Religiosity in the Opinion of Imam 'Ali

In the thought and life style of imam 'Ali, religious health and religiosity is of the greatest affair in life and the most basic aspect of the human being life, as we see in a teaching of imam 'Ali,

أَلَا وَ إِنَّهُ لَا يَضُرُّكُمْ تَضْيِيعُ شَيْءٍ مِنْ دُنْيَاكُمْ بَعْدَ حِفْظِكُمْ قَائِمَةَ دِينِكُمْ أَلَا وَ إِنَّهُ لَا يَنْفَعُكُمْ بَعْدَ تَضْيِيعِ دِينِكُمْ شَيْءٌ حَافَظْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَمْرِ دُنْيَاكُمْ[21].

"*Be aware that you are not harmed if you lose a thing from the world of you, in case you keep safe the foundation of your religion. Be aware that there is no benefit in whatever you save up in if you lose your religion*."

In his opinion, tolerating hardship was easy in the light of soundness of religion and he knew sound religion prior to anything. 'Ali and the holy Prophet are the proof of this. Sheikh Saduq narrated from 'Ali (a.s.) on his authority that the holy Prophet of Islam was delivering a lecture for us at the end of Sha'ban and said,

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

It is apparent that the most important concerns of imam ‘Ali in life was soundness of religion. In the changes after the Prophet also the most important issue that imam ‘Ali noticed was the soundness of religion. He wrote in his letter to Egyptian sent by Malik Ashtar (when he was appointed as their governor):

امّا بعد فان الله سبحانه بعث محمداً (صلى الله عليه و آله) نذيراً للعالمين و مهيمناً على المرسلين، فلمّا مضى صلّى الله عليه و آله تنازع المسلمون الامر من بعده فو الله ما كان يُلقى فى رُوعى و لا يخطر ببالى انّ العرب تُزعج هذا الامر من بعده ـ صلى الله عليه و آله ـ عن اهل بيته، و لا انّهم مُنَّحوه عنّى من بعده؟ فما راعنى الاّ انثيال الناس على فلان يبايعونه

فامسكتُ يدى حتى رأيت راجعة الناس قد رجعت عن الاسلام يدعون الى محقِ دين محمد ـصلى الله عليه و آله ـ فخشيت ان لم انصر الاسلام و اهله ان ارى فيه ثَلْماً او هدماً تكون المصيبة به علىّ اعظم من فوت ولايتكم التى انما هى متاع ايامٍ قلائل يزول منها ما كان كما يزول السراب، او كما يتقشّع السحاب، فنهضت فى تلك الاحداث حتى زاح الباطل و زهق، و اطمأنّ الدين و تَنْهنَه[23].

And then truly God Almighty appointed Muhammad to warn people by Him not to disobey Him and he is the proof of his previous prophets. When he left the world to meet his God (after his demise), Muslims came in discord about rulership and started fighting. I swear by God I did not think and it didn’t past

اَيها الناس، اِنه قد أقبل إليكم شهر الله بالبركة و الرحمة و المغفرة ...

“*Truly, the month of God’s Mercy is approaching you with its blessings, bounty and forgiving*.”

After the sermon of the holy Prophet regarding the merits of Ramadan Month, ‘Ali said, I stood up and told the holy Prophet what are the best practices in this month? The holy Prophet said, “Oh, Abul-Hasan! The best actions in this month is to have fear of (disobeying of) whatever God has set.” ‘Ali reported that after this remark, the holy Prophet cried. I asked what makes you cry? He said, “I remember what they will do to you in this month. It is as if in that time I am with you and I can see you; you are in the pray and the one who is the worst of people, worst of ancestors and of descendants, and is similar to the killer of the camel of Saleh trib, will touch your head by his sword and your bears will be colored by the blood of your head.” ‘Ali said,

" قلت يا رسول الله، و ذلک فى سلامة من دينى؟"

I said, “oh the holy Prophet of God! In that time is my religion safe?” He answered,

فى سلامة من دينک.

“In that time your religion is sound.”[22]

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

my mind that Arabs, after the demise of the holy Prophet, would seize caliphate from my family or stopped me of caliphate after the Prophet. Nothing made me worried or surprised me unless people's hurriedness to that person and swore allegiance with him. So I stepped away and I saw a group did not stay in his religion and turned their back to Islam and invited people to destroy the religion of Muhammad. Then I scared if I do not help Islam and Muslims, a division or destruction might strike it, that one would be more severe to me than deprivation of rulership. ... then I stood up amongst all storm and stress to scatter wrong communities, they were destroyed and religion became stable and calmed down".

'Ali (a.), following the transitions after the Prophet and changes in the path of rulership, stepped away but when the soul of Islam was triggered, he stood up. He gave priority to the health of religion over rulership. Nothing was considered as important as the soundness of religion in his opinion. Saqifa event happened, then one of the sons of Abu Lahab ibn Abdul-Mutalib composed some poetries to defend 'Ali complaining of Saqifa. It included some threats in his poetries. When 'Ali heard them, sent someone to him and ordered not to read them again. Then 'Ali said,

سلامة الدين أحب إلينا من غيره[24]

"*The health of religion in our opinion is the most beloved things*."

Religious Pathology and Religiosity in the Sermons and Writings of Imam 'Ali

According to the importance of soundness of religion and religiosity in the opinion of Imam 'Ali, it is natural that his attitude towards this subject be very serious. And basically taking the path of God that He wants for us is not feasible without recognizing the thieves on the way. 'Ali (a.s.) is the son of Quran trained by Prophet. As long as religious pathology and religiosity are mentioned in the holy book of God and teachings of prophets, therefore it becomes manifested in the words of Ali (a.s.) which is the interpretation of holy Quran and extension of teachings of Prophet. In addition, the transition after the holy Prophet and harms in religion and religiosity caused imam 'Ali talked in this regard and issued solutions and did his best in this way.

In his words, Imam 'Ali used various words to refer to this topic. Words like "آفة الدين"[25], "فساد الدين", "للدين[26] منقصة[27]",

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

"منهكة للدين"[28], "الادغال فى الدين"[29], and more.

In addition to these words, sometimes Imam 'Ali talked about alteration of these words and said in a sermon:

"أيها الناس، سيأتى عليكم زمان يكفأ فيه الإسلام كما يكفأ الإناء بما فيه.[30]"

"*Oh people! Soon it will be a time when Islam will be similar to a container which is holding upside down and whatever in it is poured out*."

Or in another sermon said,

لَبِسَ الاسلام لبس الفَروِ مقلوبا[31]

"*The sheepskin (the coat) of Islam is wore inside out*."

Sometimes 'Ali warned about religious pathology:

كأنكم تريدون أن تكفئوا الاسلام على وجهه ... ألا و قد قطعتم قيد الاسلام، و عطلتم حدوده، و أمتم أحكامه[32]

It is as if you want to overturn Islam… right! Be aware that you tear apart the rope between you and Islam, you violate its boarders, and did not put into practice its rules. He also said,

يَأْتِي عَلَى النَّاسِ زَمَانٌ لَا يَبْقَى فِيهِمْ مِنَ الْقُرْآنِ إِلَّا رَسْمُهُ وَ مِنَ الْإِسْلَامِ إِلَّا اسْمُهُ وَ مَسَاجِدُهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَامِرَةٌ مِنَ الْبِنَاءِ خَرَابٌ مِنَ الْهُدَى سُكَّانُهَا وَ عُمَّارُهَا شَرُّ أَهْلِ الْأَرْضِ مِنْهُمْ تَخْرُجُ الْفِتْنَةُ[33]

It will come a time when people do not know anything of Quran but its name and from Islam a name. In that time, people will renovate their mosques but destroy its spirituality and the maker of those mosques are the worst people of the earth; seditions are traced back to them and errors find security in their custody.

End Notes

---

[1] Nahj al-Balaghah, *Sharif Radi*,letter 77
[2] Ibid, sermon 127
[3]Ibid, Hikmah 227
[4] Ghurar al-Hikam, vol.1, No.748
[5] Ibid, 3924
[6] Ibid, p.431, H.32
[7] Ibid, p.473
[8] Ibid, No.6957
[9] Ibid, vol.4, p.416
[10] Ibid, No.4421
[11] Tasnif Ghurar al-Hikam, 6780
[12] Nahj al-Balaghah, words 209
[13] ibid
[14] ibid
[15] Sharh Ghurar al-Hikam, vol.1, p.364
[16] Ibid, p.375
[17] Ibid, vol.4, p.125
[18] Ibid, vol.4, p.211
[19] Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, ibn Meytham al-Bahrani, vol.2, pp.306-307
[20] Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 88
[21] Ibid, sermon 173
[22] Al-Amali (Saduq), pp.84-86
[23] Nahj al-Balaghah, letter 62

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]

[24] Al-Akhbar al-Mufaqiyyat, p.581; Sharh Ibn Abi al-Hadid, vol.6, p.21
[25] Sharh Ghurar al-Hikam, vol.3, p.101
[26] Nahj al-Balaghah, Hikmat, 319
[27] Sharh Ghurar al-Hikam, vol.4, pp.125, 383, 417
[28] Ibid, letter 53
[29] Ibid, sermon 216
[30] Ibid, sermon 103
[31] Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 108
[32] Ibid, sermon 192
[33] Ibid, Hikmat 369

[Downloaded from safinah-al-nejat.ir on 2026-11-23]