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### Original Research

#### **The study of freedom of expression in Islamic teachings with an emphasis on *Nahj al-Balagha***

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#### **Abstract**

Freedom of expression is one of the issues of concern to human societies in the contemporary world, because this issue is one of the most important basic rights of people in societies due to its special nature, and on the other hand, it is always in conflict with the authoritarian point of

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view. Islam accepts freedom of expression for everyone in the Islamic society, but it has specified limits and regulations for it. These restrictions and conditions, more than cumbersome and intolerable regulations, are instructions for better use of freedom, which if not followed, not only the freedom of everyone in the society will not be realized, but also the category, it will become anti-value and create cultural chaos. Imam Ali (peace be upon him), during his rule period, did not only limit the freedom of expression, but also emphasized the expansion of this freedom. Based on Islam, since man is a free being, the privacy of his freedom must always be preserved. Considering the importance of this issue, the purpose of this research is to study freedom of expression in Islamic teachings with emphasis on *Nahj al-Balagha*. Based on this, the related themes to freedom of expression have been extracted and explained from the point of view of *Nahj al-Balagha*, and conclusions have been presented in this regard.

**Contribution:** In the Islamic system, Muslims have the right to freedom of expression in ideological, political and social issues, of course, with the observance of the limits set for this freedom so that it does not become a means of violating Islamic and other human values.

**Keywords:** freedom of expression; religion; Islam; Islamic teachings; Nahj al-Balagha.

## Introduction

A matter of debate in all religions, eras and human sciences, freedom has various individual and social types, including freedom of expression. While the concept affects various cultural, scientific and economic aspects of the individual and social life of human beings, its principles and limits are not the same in different schools and religions. Whether considered from individual or spiritual and social angles, freedom is needed to achieve perfection and the ultimate stage of human creation. Philosophically, man was originally created independent and free in order to choose the right path, differentiate between what

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is good and bad and guarantee happiness in this world and the hereafter with a perfect mind and clear thinking that are related to their pure and divine nature (Ahmadi **2000 (#CIT0001\_8368)** ).

It is impossible to have a united and acceptable definition for some concepts (e.g. freedom) in all religions and schools due to various reasons. To deal with this problem, it is best to evaluate the principles, examples, limits and impacts of freedom as its definition would be different based on the mentioned components. In fact, there are distinct definitions of freedom in different sciences of even one religion. Motahari's definition of freedom may be the most appropriate definition regardless of various scientific orientations and beliefs: man is free and independent, meaning that his action originates from his will and complete satisfaction and the approval of his pure power, and no factor forces him against his desire, pleasure, satisfaction and judgement; neither destiny nor any other factor (Motahari **2000 (#CIT0003\_8368)** :395).

Different definitions have been proposed for freedom of expression: freedom of expression is a natural right that all human beings enjoy equally as human beings, and as a result, they are allowed to express their thoughts as long as they do not violate the rights of others and values respected by the society. According to this definition, freedom of expression is primarily a natural right for all human beings. In addition, all people can express their thoughts and ideas equally. Based on this definition, freedom of expression is limited to two things: firstly, it does not violate the rights of others, and secondly, it does not violate the value principles respected by society (Javadi Amoli **2014 (#CIT0002\_8368)** ). Freedom of expression is defined as expressing any thought or idea in various ways, such as speech, writing, image and film, theatre and *ta'zieh* [expression of grief] and anything that can embody human thought in the minds of the audience. It is notable that while the mentioned tools for the expression of thoughts and beliefs are the most important ones, they are not the

only ways used to express oneself (Sobhani Tabrizi **2005 (#CIT0004\_8368)** ).

Among Islamic teachings, *Nahj al-Balagha* is one of the most famous books, in which principles governing political thought include avoiding coercion and reluctance and paying attention to rights, freedoms and social thought. The breadth and variety of topics and expressions used in the field of political and governmental thought expressed in this book will be the answer to any question if the book's content is not interpreted arbitrarily. In addition, the comprehensiveness of *Nahj al-Balagha* becomes clear to human beings when attention is paid to all of its dimensions, which will protect people from exaggeration in understanding the book. The book highly values the element of thought, and Imam Ali was the most excellent person who protected the valuable position of thinking. Considering the significance of the subject, the present study aimed to evaluate freedom of expression in Islamic teachings with an emphasis on *Nahj al-Balagha*.

### **Freedom of expression in Islamic societies**

In a religious society, people should not be forced to do anything. People should make decisions with free will and must dedicate efforts voluntarily. Imam Ali let people have their beliefs as long as they did not damage Islam and the Islamic government. He even expressed: 'by Allah, so long as the affairs of Muslims remain intact and there is no oppression in it save on me' (*Nahj al-Balagha*, Sermon 74). However, he would stand against those false beliefs that destroyed or disturbed the Islamic system. It is not possible to include the expression of thoughts against religion and Islam in a framework of freedom of expression if it results in defamation of God or damage to religion.

Imam Ali allowed non-Islamic beliefs in an Islamic community as long as they did not violate the rights of others. This great man never forced people to accept a belief considering the social conditions of that time. Freedom of expression shows human values to a certain extent.

Therefore, a person's value is suppressed, and their human dignity is offended when they are forced to accept an even righteous belief. In response to threats and sudden death, Imam Ali stated: 'surely, there is a strong protective shield of Allah over me' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 62). In terms of this statement and the importance of the sermon, we read: his companions repeatedly informed him about the bad intentions of Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljam, and signs of his bad intentions were also revealed. According to some narrations, one day Imam Ali was giving a sermon and Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljam, who was sitting in front of the pulpit, whispered: 'I swear to God, I will relieve the people from you'. Those who heard this sentence arrested him and brought him to Imam Ali (a.s.) after the sermon, but Imam Ali said: 'Leave him alone'. Imam Ali could have punished Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljam or prevented him from doing improper motives before martyrdom. Nevertheless, he let him go and did not suppress his opinion.

### **Outcomes of freedom of expression in Islamic societies**

Freedom of expression is to express thoughts rationally without an obstacle or fear. Evidently, a matter that is expanded in the community appropriately and is followed by the nation and government will have proper outcomes. Therefore, freedom of expression and efficient thought in society prevent the spread of the destabilising factors of society and stabilise its durability as much as possible.

According to Imam Ali, misplaced praise is fake and contrary to inner desire. He believed that people should not praise him with improper words and must say what is actually on their minds. People will be no longer forced to express misplaced praise and flattery when they have freedom of expression in society. They can freely express what is on their mind and avoid hypocrisy and unreal behaviours. In a sermon, Imam Ali said about the forced praise of a person: 'do not mention for me handsome praise' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 216). Such praise has no value

and credibility because it seems that a person suppresses what is in their heart and is forced to praise due to social conditions and personal interests. Imam Ali divided people into two groups, including real and fake brothers, who only smile in front of the person and do not say what is actually on their mind. Imam Ali suggested treating the people of the second category with good behaviour and avoiding fake and unwanted communication. In another sermon, he mentioned: 'do not meet me with flattery' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 216); in other words, what they say and what they truly believe must be the same and they should not be afraid to say what is actually on their mind.

In addition, fewer errors occur in a community in which people have freedom of expression because they will move towards reform when the word of truth stands against error. In this regard, Imam Ali expressed: 'therefore, do not refrain from telling the truth or consulting in justice, because I do not consider myself the kind of person who makes no mistakes' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 216). In another sermon, he mentioned: 'those who accept different thoughts and opinions know right from wrong' (Nahj al-Balagha, Wisdom 173). In this statement, Imam Ali considers freedom of expression to have emerged through counselling and he regards counselling to be equal to protection against errors. Counselling leads to a variety of opinions, the most efficient of which could be selected from different thoughts.

Moreover, 'enjoining good and forbidding wrong' is a sign of freedom of expression. According to Imam Ali, enjoining good and forbidding wrong to exist to avoid the domination of evil over the individual and society. By using this tool, falsehood will decline, and rational thinking will be promoted. In *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam Ali expressed:

[D]o not give up bidding for good  
and forbidding from evil lest the  
mischievous gain positions over you,  
and then if you will pray, the prayers

will not be granted. This is because, if it is enjoining good, goodness will be distributed and there will be no place for evil. And, if evil occurs, it will be corrected through enjoining good and forbidding evil. (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 47)

Finally, freedom of expression and intimacy between the ruler and the people lead to friendship between them, which results in the pouring of divine blessing and salvation. Imam Ali advised Malik al-Ashtar to have a close relationship with people, listen to their words and take advantage of their opinions. They should express their actual opinion about an unjust matter and not refrain from telling what is right. Imam Ali stated: 'the prophet of Islam has repeatedly expressed: a nation that does not take the right of the weak back from the strong, without anxiety or excuse, will not be saved' (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 53). In other words, you do not need to worry about expressing your true opinion about taking back the properties and rights taken by those in power because, if that happens, you will not achieve eternal prosperity.

### **Freedom of choice in Islamic societies**

In his righteous words, Imam Ali referred to people's right to choose their leader. The right to choose is one of the most important basic rights, acknowledging and accepting, which means 'freedom of choice' or 'freedom of vote'. The selection of a country's leader without the involvement of its people is interpreted as an autocracy in a community where people play no role in their society's destiny. In such communities, people are unquestioningly obedient to the government and have no freedom. Therefore, there is no freedom of expression or opinion in this type of government. The superiority of human beings over other creatures is understood by having a conscious choice based on personal desire and inclination. A compulsory choice will have positive impacts even if it is the right and rational alternative. This is mainly due to the fact that, against the inner desire, the

person is drawn towards a motive and a goal that they are not inclined towards. The Caliphate of Ali is an example of freedom of choice, where Imam Ali let people choose their own leader. Even though Imam Ali had a right to the caliphate, he did not force people to accept him and left the job of choosing him in their own hands. To express his indifference to the acceptance of the caliphate, Imam Ali stated:

[I]f people had not come to me and supporters had not exhausted the argument and if there had been no pledge of Allah with the learned to the effect that they should not acquiesce in the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed, I would have cast the rope of Caliphate on its own shoulders and would have given the last one the same treatment as to the first one. (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 3)

This means that the people gathered with desire and enthusiasm to pledge allegiance to that honourable person, and this government, which they are now dissatisfied with, was of their own choice and they were informed that it will act according to the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet. In other words, people's allegiance to Imam Ali was not compulsory but voluntary. Imam Ali described his revolutionary plan to the people and ensured them that he will act based on justice, the Quran, and the Sunnah of the Prophet in case of being accepted. He knew that tolerating justice would be hard on people. After the killing of the third caliph (by a group of Egyptian protesters), he told the people:

Know that if I accept your invitation, I will treat you according to what I know (with the principles of truth and justice) and I will never listen to the words of this and that and the blame of those who blame! And if you let me go, I will be like one of



you (and with no helper, I won't be responsible), but maybe I will be more obedient and obedient than you, relative to the head of the government and governors (in preserving the existence of Islam and the interests of the people). And it is better for me to be a minister and adviser to you than to be an emir and a leader (because if I am an emir and you oppose me, you will become a disbeliever, but if someone else is in my place, this is not the case). (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 92)

In this sermon, Imam Ali expressed that people would be happier if they let him go because, in that case, he would obey the ruler even more than the people. However, if he was accepted as the leader, it would be difficult for the people because Imam Ali's ruling was not to their taste. Therefore, he asked them to be their chief so that he would not cause dissatisfaction.

In another sermon, Imam Ali expressed people's freedom of choice, stating: 'you yourselves invited me to it and prepared me for it' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 205). He also mentioned: 'the people were so pleased about swearing allegiance to me that young and old people moved toward me' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 229). In another sermon, Imam Ali remarked: 'you advanced towards me shouting "allegiance, allegiance" like she-camels having delivered newly born young ones leaping towards their young' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 137). Freedom and freedom of expression were so important that Imam Ali considered his government legitimate only if it was based on people's freedom and conscious voting. In one of his letters, Imam Ali wrote: 'then, people pledged allegiance to me with no reluctance or coercion' (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 1).

In addition, Imam Ali valued intellectual independence and the development of thought and the use of thinking power. He also appreciated people's thoughtful choice that was

independent of power. Once, a man asked Imam Ali about the reason behind his fight against treaty breakers, and he talked to him convincingly such that he pledged alliance to Imam Ali after understanding his justifications. Imam Ali told him:

[I]f those at your back send you as a forerunner to search out a rain-fed area for them, and you return to them and apprise them of greenery and water but they disagree with you and go towards dry and barren land, what would you do then? He said: I would leave them and go towards greenery and water. Amir al-mu'minin then said: So then extend your hand. (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 170)

This man related that: 'By Allah, by such a clear argument I could not refrain from swearing allegiance to Amir al-mu'minin'.

Imam Ali guided him with correct and logical arguments and allowed him to choose freely while directing him to the true path. In his government, Imam Ali valued this right not in terms of political expediency but in terms of the fact that man has dignity and value in thinking and free will. In his speech, Imam Ali expressed that his government was like a land full of water and grass, where God's mercy was touched. Nevertheless, those in pursuit of nothingness voluntarily turned away from this blessing. Imam Ali convinced that man in this way and did not explain the issue of his governorship to him. Imam Ali asked him to explain what he would do if people turned down his invitation to this land and turned to a barren land. He answered that he would leave them alone and head to the cultivated land. Therefore, Imam Ali made him choose a free and independent path, and that person believed in Imam Ali's words after thinking about them and gave allegiance voluntarily.

### **Equal rights of religious minorities and Muslims in Islamic society**

There have always been religious minorities in a single society throughout history. During the reign of Imam Ali, there were also different minorities, and each of them was free to have their opinions as long as they would not hurt Islam's framework. Islam protected their lives, properties, dignity and freedom as long as they did not break the agreement and act against Islam. These minorities were respected during the governorship of Imam Ali and were similar to other people regarding their rights. In fact, religious minorities could differentiate between right and wrong and participate in the correction of society by giving criticism and warnings. According to Imam Ali, religious minorities were a part of Islamic society and were not considered aliens. They had the right to determine their own destiny and could become citizens of the Islamic country of their own free will.

Following hearing news about the invasion of Al Anbar city and people's weakness, Imam Ali expressed:

I have come to know that every one of them entered upon Muslim women and other women under the protection of Islam and took away their ornaments from legs, arms, necks and ears, and no woman could resist it except by pronouncing the verse, we are for Allah and to Him we shall return. (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 27)

Imam Ali considered non-Muslims in the Islamic land ruled by himself as refugees of Islam, emphasising that they must be protected just like Muslims and there should be no security discrimination between Muslims and non-Muslims as long as they are refugees there. He was really upset when realising that the military had ignored the rights of religious minorities and did not protect them under his rule. He remarked: 'then they got back laden with wealth without any

wound or loss of life. If a Muslim dies after all this grief, there is no blame, he deserves it' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 27).

### **Freedom of expression of opposition groups in Islamic society**

During the reign of Imam Ali, there was a group called Khawarij who challenged Imam Ali's governorship due to their inaccurate beliefs. Even though Imam Ali was aware of their false beliefs and intention to overthrow him, he let them have their freedom of belief. Moreover, in order to avoid the division of his companions, he accepted their opinions about his ruling, and he gave consent to their false desire, by compulsion and against will. Imam Ali knew that wisdom is nothing but a trick of some profiteers. Imam Ali visited the camp of Khawarij following learning about their insistence on rebellion, expressing: 'When they had raised the Quran by way of deceit, craft, artifice and cheat, did you not say: They are our brothers and our comrades in accepting Islam. They want us to cease fighting, and ask for protection through the Book of Allah, the Glorified. Our opinion is to agree with them and to end their troubles?'

Then I said to you, 'In this affair the outer side is faith, but the inner side is enmity' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 122). This means that Imam Ali did not leave them with their false beliefs; rather, he attempted to guide them and warn them against the deception of Khawarij. Imam Ali stated: 'it is not for me to bring you to what you dislike' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 208). Imam Ali treated the Khawarij with the highest level of freedom of behaviour: he did not imprison them, did not whip them and did not even cut their share of the treasury. They were always free to express their opinion and Imam Ali and his companions treated them with free beliefs. It is rarely found in the world that a government treats its opposers with this level of democracy (Motahari **2000 (#CIT0003\_8368)** :127).

### **Discussion**

Everything can become imbalanced if it goes out of its original border. Freedom of expression and

belief must be based on certain logic and boundaries. Imam Ali understood the concept of freedom appropriately and discussed it in society during his reign. Accordingly, he established a strong human bond among the people and developed laws specifically for social corrections. In addition to freedom of expression and belief, he mentioned the range of this freedom, expressing: 'an untrained tongue will express spiteful things if left this way' (Nahj al-Balagha, Wisdom 60). This means that human beings must take control over what they say and not express their thoughts disrespectfully. In fact, they must adhere to respectful acts in order to make others understand with soft speech. Along with freedom of expression, Imam Ali noted that freedom should not damage the freedom of others and society. In this regard, he affirmed:

[C]ertainly, these people are in agreement in disliking my authority. I will carry on till I perceive disunity among you; because if, in spite of the unsoundness of their view, they succeed, the whole organization of the Muslims will be shattered. (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 169)

Imam Ali stated this sermon in response to those companions of the prophet who demanded punishing the rebels against Uthman. Imam Ali stated that he would wait as long as there was no damage to the unity of the Muslim people. Otherwise, he would rise. The opponents of the legitimate government of Imam Ali enjoyed social freedom and showed their displeasure even towards the leader of the Islamic society. They were free to be active as long as their activity did not damage the rights and freedom of others. They could even engage in opposing activities in another city with a wider scope from the centre of government. Nevertheless, they were suppressed by Imam Ali, who was the leader of the community, in the war when starting to make corruption.

Imam Ali expressed: 'be aware that I am fighting with two people, someone who claims something that does not belong to him, and someone who refuses to claim his right' (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 173). In this regard, it is vital to explain that those who pledged alliance with Imam Ali but then showed corruptive behaviour were treated softly at first and asked to return to the right path. If they still refuse, they will be fought against, as we read in Quran:

[A]nd if two factions among the believers should fight, then make settlement between the two. But if one of them oppresses the other, then fight against the one that oppresses until it returns to the ordinance of Allah. And if it returns, then make a settlement between them in justice and act justly. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly. (The Holy Quran, Surah Al-Hujurat, Ayat 9)

Man is free, but his freedom should not go beyond the limits. Imam Ali fought against those who made unjust claims and felt free to do so. At the same time, he fought those who refused to do the right thing and felt free to do so. Imam Ali refrained from his companions from cursing the enemy, expressing:

I dislike you starting to abuse them, but if you describe their deeds and recount their situations that would be a better mode of speaking and a more convincing way of arguing. (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 206)

Freedom should not be accompanied by dishonour and slander. It should also not be exceeded in such a way as to harm the beliefs and system of society. People cannot even indulge in praise or blame because then the free expression would lead to disrespect or flattery.

The principle of freedom of expression is one of the most basic principles in Islam, and its various aspects have been covered in the Quran, such as counselling, advising and choosing freely in religion. Freedom of belief and expression existed during the Prophet's mission and the infallible imams, which was discussed in the present article about *Nahj al-Balagha* and Imam Ali. This issue has been so important that its various dimensions have been assessed by Islamic and western scholars. Thinkers agree that freedom of expression should not go beyond its original limits and harm the framework of government or an opinion. In an Islamic community, freedom of expression is considered so fundamental and important that people who exist as citizens of an Islamic country should not be opposed to their correct opinions. In addition, they have the right to comment on the affairs of the country. Perhaps, a citizen (even if he is a non-Muslim) can make a ruler who has an inappropriate act realise his mistake or even stand in front of him with the right opinion and expression.

### **Conclusion**

According to Imam Ali's statements in *Nahj al-Balagha*, people should not be forced to accept the leader, but they have the right to choose their leader. People should not be afraid to deal with the rulers and should freely express their opinions and criticisms, and the ruler should call to the truth with reason. Citizens can criticise and make the ruler aware of mistakes. Religious minorities who are citizens of Islamic society have equal rights similar to that of Muslim citizens. Finally, freedom of expression will have positive effects on society and the individual in any society, especially in Islamic society. It also removes evils and adversities and promotes goodness and blessings and ultimately moves the individual and the society towards health and happiness.

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The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

#### Authors' contributions

M.I. wrote original draft, A.A.R-C. conceptualised, T.K., H.T.A. and A.Y.H. added visualisation, I.M. investigated, F.A.H.AI-K performed the formal analysis.

#### Ethical considerations

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#### Data availability

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