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Dakwahtainment and its Discontents [Religion and Television in Indonesia: Ethics Surrounding Dakwahtainment]

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Dakwahtainment and its Discontents

This chapter will critically examine the *Dakwahtainment* industry and assess its implications and impacts within the framework of ethical discontent. The problems raised here include lack of meaningful substance in Islamic propagation, commodification of religion and ethical criticisms.

The Dumbing Down Effect

Dakwahtainment or Islamic televangelism is a concept combining *dakwah* (or Islamic propagation) and entertainment in television broadcasts.[40] The phenomenon denotes the proliferation and amplification of popular Islam, where "fans", "friends" and "followers" participate through the medium of television and transform themselves into a *jama'ah* (religious congregation). It is through television that celebrity *ustadzs* gain their credibility and authority, challenging the conventional power, influence and charismatic appeal of the *kiyais*

[40] The dataset presented in this chapter is mainly derived from direct observation through recordings made with my research assistants throughout 2012. Others were derived from KPI and MUI's documents on monitoring, warning and advisory letters.

(Javanese, religious scholar-teachers), whose base has been largely centred in and around the *Pesantrens*.

Discontent with *Dakwahtainment* in Indonesia begins with the way it systematically mixes spiritual enlightenment and entertainment, which creates a dumbing-down effect. This is often at the expense of the substance of the religious message. Asa concept and practice, dumbing down originated in American popular culture. It was seen as consistent with the way capitalism and the free market generally operates, focusing solely on the supply of the goods the consumers demand with very little consideration for making them smarter. It assumes that cultural products need not be intellectually heavy, if the intended goal is to achieve accessibility, comprehensibility and marketability. The notion of dumbing down in media and cultural studies denotes the deliberate de-intellectualisation of cultural contents to ensure mass acceptability. This line of argument is based on the assumption that the majority of television viewers – as consumers of culture – prefer to take pleasure in such mode of thinking. The idea suggests that the dumber a cultural product is the better. This is because the uncritical masses can relate to it more easily than they would otherwise.

Many *Dakwahtainment* programmes deliberately deploy props, scripts and setups based on comedies of error to support Islamic propagation. Celebrity preachers such as the late Uje, Yusuf Mansyur and Mamah Dedeh are all partnered with comedians, who act as their host or programme counterpart. Such an industrial tactic is supposedly to lighten up, not enlighten, the usually all-too-serious Islamic *dakwah* messages, effectively giving the impression that religion is fun, cool, trendy and most importantly intellectually digestible. The *Dakwahtainment* phenomenon has therefore transformed what used to

be serious-minded *dakwah* programmes into religious preaching and gathering filled with routine anecdotes and jokes. This is combined with an array of performative skill sets employed by the celebrity *ustadzs*, which ultimately results in a shift in the way the audience perceives and expects religion and spirituality to be.

The whole industrialisation of *Dakwahtainment* with the range of props, scripts and setups has become a necessary evil for these programmes to flourish in Indonesian television, hence safeguarding the interest of the supposedly dumb and uncritical public. The previously famous preacher Aa Gym, whose fame skyrocketed from the late 1990s to 2006, had to succumb to such pressure and evidently tried hard to appeal to the audience by preaching anecdotes to the Muslim masses.

Mansyur too is unable to guard himself from similar industrial pressures. Being a celebrity *ustadz*, he once recounted to the author how a television producer insisted on him to have a "comedian looking like *ondel-ondel*" (traditional giant puppet from Jakarta) in his programme to infuse entertainment for the purposes of the audience.[41] Mansyur adamantly rejected the idea and left to sign a contract with another television network. "I have no problem with this. Besides, I never get paid anyway for my *dakwah*. I don't need money. I am already rich. You can ask any of the television networks, I never ask compensation for what I do," Mansyur confidently said.[42] Currently, Mansyur has two television programmes, namely *Wisata Hati* (tour of the heart) and *Chatting dengan YM* (chatting with Yusuf Mansyur) on

[41] Interview with Mansyur on October 11, 2012 in Daarul Qur'an, a boarding school for the memorisers of the Quran, located in Cikokol, Tangerang.
[42] Idem.

ANTV. While *Wisata Hati* is more geared towards the study of the Quran and its *tafsir* (interpretation or hermeneutics), the latter is designed to be an informal talk show to discuss matters related to Islam or religious way of life with guests invited to talk about their experiences. Like other *Dakwahtainment* programmes, such as *Hati ke Hati Bersama Mamah Dedeh*, the host of the *Chatting dengan YM* is also a well-known comedian.

The inclusion of such comedians in the *Dakwahtainment* programmes is indeed ironic. The problem begins with the dichotomy of the *tuntunan* and *tontonan* principle: spiritual guidance plus entertainment. *Dakwah* programmes succumb easily to the lure of the entertainment business model, reducing considerably the integrity and credibility of the religious message, as well as that of the preachers, who receive handsome amounts in return for the advertisements they invite to these programmes. This is not to mention the high income received by some of these celebrity preachers from the programme commercials and direct product endorsements in television advertisements.[43]

Hence, in the context of the Indonesian *Dakwahtainment* programmes, the dumbing-down effect works both ways for the media executives – who conveniently exploit the viewers' naiveté – as well as the audience, who just want to cut to the chase, and get the tips and tricks on how to become a good Muslim, receive salvation and enter Paradise. The dumbing-down effect also psychologically affects the preachers engaged in this practice, as it provides a disincentive for

[43] More discussion on this topic will be delved into in subsequent chapters.

them to dig deeper into the essence of the teachings of the religion and the method in which to preach it.

As a typical practice, dumbing-down in Indonesian *Dakwahtainment* programmes takes the form of inviting comedians in the hope that they caninstil lightness and offer entertainment to the viewers. In many cases, the producers and creative team members of the programme insist that the celebrity comedians engage in deliberate patterns of action: one is asking stupid questions; the other is muddling (*ngerekcoki*) the programme, which if ever effective would be perceived by the audience as a comedy of errors. In other cases, the comedians host the programme, which promotes the image that Islam is not a radical religion and that the teachings are accessible and enjoyable for ordinary Muslims to digest.

Typical *Dakwahtainment* programmes usually involve at least one religious preacher, called *ustadz* (male), *ustadzah* (female), *da'i* or simply *penceramah* (literally, one who gives sermons). He or she is often accompanied by a celebrity comedian or former model or actress acting as the host of such programmes. In some programmes, the standard practice is to make clear when and how to infuse the *tuntunan* and when to bring forward the *tontonan*. Aa Abdel, a comedian and host for the daily programme entitled *Hati ke Hati Bersama Mamah Dedeh* (Heart to Heart with Mother Dedeh) on *ANTV*, recalls how previously during the height of his popular programme in *Indosiar*,[44] the producer and creative team strictly followed a principle of 70% *tuntunan* and 30% *tontonan*, where the host becomes responsible for

[44] The Indosiar programme entitled "Mamah dan Aa" (Mother and Brother) preceded the one in ANTV. While the latter has been broadcast for just one and a half years, the former one was broadcast consistently for six years, which attest to the popularity of the programme mostly among Indonesian women viewers.

compliance with the principle.[45] This way, the entertainment aspect is never forgotten nor left out and is sure to lighten up the spirit of the programme. If the host happens to be a comedian, like Aa Abdel, the entertainment aspect is guaranteed through the habitual incorporation of witty comments and humour, which may or may not be to the benefit of the moral and religious messages being put forth.



Well-known actresses, models, and eminent MCs often serve as hosts to the more serious *dakwah* programmes with Muslim intellectuals such as Professor Quraish Shihab and Professor Nazaruddin Umar. Utilising their renowned facial beauty and fully equipped with their top-notch Muslim designer fashion, they serve as eye-candy to draw in viewers' attention and interest. Such a host is Inneke Kusherawati, a former model and famous actress, who now dons the *hijab* (veil), and frequently hosts Professor Shihab's Quranic *tafsir* (interpretation) programme *Tafsir Al-Mishbah* in *MetroTV*,[46] particularly during the month of Ramadhan.

In format and stage setting, *Dakwahtainment* programmes apply a structured sequencing that allows for a free of flow of questions to the *ustadzs* or *ustadzahs*. This is indeed a departure from the New Order period, when questions posed during *dakwah* programmes were

[45] Interview held at ANTV studio in Jakarta on October 13, 2012.

[46] A graduate of the reputable Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Shihab is a well-respected Islamic scholar, who authored a 15-volume series of tafsir of the entire Quran. For a short while during the tail end of Suharto's regime, he was appointed as Indonesia's Minister for Religious Affairs.

screened and pre-conceived to prevent any sensitive discussions being openly aired or broadcast. *Dakwahtainment* programmes largely adopt the form of talk shows with an initial seven-minute *tawsiyah* (Arabic, spiritual advice), followed by a question-and-answer session, where the conversation between the *penceramah* (preacher) and *jamaah* (congregation)is regulated by the celebrity host and monitored closely by the producer and creative team members backstage, giving instructions and tactics on how to run the show. Such a system perpetuates the *Dakwahtainment* industry, which in turn dictates the kind and quality of programmes shown on television and how religion functions so effectively so as to lure the television audience.

This is not to argue that no *dakwah* programmes on Indonesian television are of sufficient quality. There are *dakwah* programmes, such as *Indonesia Berdzikir* or *Indonesia Bangkit* on *TVOne*, which are normally set in major mosques in Indonesia and emphasise the core messages of the sermons, with little room for questions and answers. To lump these together with the regular *Dakwahtainment* programmes is comparing apples with oranges. In these serious *dakwah* programmes, the preachers invited to give the sermons are earnest and solemn *ustadzs* concerned with contemporary problems of the Indonesian nation specifically or the Islamic *ummah* generally. Often these programmes touch upon sensitive political issues, such as corruption, abuse of power, and a lack of pro-poor policies in the country. The only drawback is that they do not share the same level of mass appeal as the *Dakwahtainment* programmes, as the *ustadzs* or preachers unmistakably lack star quality compared to their more popular counterparts, consequently rendering their sermons less entertaining, especially among lower-middle-class Indonesian Muslims.

Dakwahtainment programmes have reached millions of viewers over a course of around 15 years and are followed by those who enjoy these programmes in the comfort of their homes. The key formula for success is maintaining a good balance between *tuntunan* and *tontonan.* In the words of Aa Gym's MQ Corp, the principle can be succinctly put as "*dakwah* content that is entertaining". This is done by amalgamating the religious fervour of the Muslim middle class with the functional utilisation of the profit-hungry media industry that constantly seeks for new and varied forms of entertainment.

For Mamah Dedeh, the popular female preacher who has been successful in both *Indosiar* and *ANTV*, the balanced formula of 70% *tuntunan* and 30% *tontonan* has been religiously observed. This way, the audience can receive the best of both worlds, where religion is deliberately mixed and entangled with the pleasures of entertainment. Similar to infotainment and variety comedy shows on Indonesian television, *Dakwahtainment* also suffers from lack of substance and meaningfulness. The same trivial questions are asked over and over again in *Dakwahtainment* programmes, prompting even Mamah Dedeh, who has been in the industry for at least eight years, to comment, "I get tired of such questions being asked time and again."[47] This has been one of the reasons why the producer of *Hati ke Hati Bersama Mamah Dedeh* (heart to heart) once said, "The quality of the programme depends very much on the quality of the questions being posed during the programme."[48] Being a live programme with real audiences indeed requires some form of engineering, especially when the programme entails a question and answer session, where improvisation is imperative.

[47] Interview held with Mamah Dedeh on October 13, 2012.
[48] Interview held with Desy on October 13, 2012.

Thus, for *Dakwahtainment* to maintain its relevance and audience retention, the producers and creative teams must constantly confront the challenge of formatting and reformatting the programmes.[49]

Related to this binary imperative of *tuntunan* and *tontonan*, *Dakwahtainment* programmes also suffer from intentional dumbing down by the *penceramah* (preachers) and the *jamaah* (congregation). On the side of the *penceramah*, it is crucial that the subject matter for discussion is deliberately simple and easy to understand. As with Aa Gym at his peak of career, simplicity is key to roping in as many audience members as possible. This is done through the choice of topics, the way in which the topics are discussed, and the infusion of jokes, poems and songs to lighten up the programme. In the case of Uje, his high-pitched voice, eloquent recitation of the Quran and good looks serve to inspire, guide and entertain the audience all at the same time.

On the part of the *jama'ah*, dumbing down comes in the form of indolence and the habit of asking uncritically about basic Islamic precepts, which most of the time are irrelevant or in significant. When given the chance to pose questions, the congregation mostly raise trivial issues pertaining to *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence. At the superficial level, this may suggest that Indonesian Muslims are inclined to abide by the law (*mematuhi peraturan*), but it may signify a greater problem in understanding Islam: that religion is all about what is permissible (*halal*) and what is forbidden (*haram*). The most common questions pertain to *wudlu* (ablution), *shalat* (prayers), *haji* (pilgrimage), *munakahat* (marriage), and *ghibah* (gossiping). Such a reductionist

[49] During the time of the research, and after intensive conversations with the producer of Heart to Heart, the daily live programme now gives away goodie bags to the members of the audience who pose the best questions. This is one of the ways in which such Dakwahtainment programmes adapt the format and adopt new ways to retain audience interest.

approach to Islam is reinforced by the persistent aversion towards issues that are relevant and pertinent to Indonesian society, such as social justice, corruption, governance, juvenile delinquency, leadership, environmental degradation, and many strategic issues of high importance.

This could be in part because the members of the *Majelis Ta'lim* or congregation are largely people, notably women, with a low educational background. When the team of researchers randomly analysed the socioeconomic demography of the studio audience in *Heart to Heart* in early 2012, it was apparent that most of the members of the *Majelis Ta'lim* were of low educational level, with most having only primary and secondary education. Only one person was a graduate of a tertiary level institution. Interviewed for the research, the former producer of *Heart to Heart*, Desy, said, "We have to be mindful that Mamah Dedeh's congregation is mostly *ibu-ibu* (mothers). And when I tried to increase the theme's substance a bit, the *ibu-ibu* would often be stupefied. And so, we would just ask them to pose any question they like, even if they were outside of the theme of each episode."[50]

Apart from the deliberate lowering of the programme's substance, the case of Mamah Dedeh also provides insight into the cultural gulf between her traditional constituents and the others. Desy recounted to the author how on one occasion the programme received a *Majelis Ta'lim* comprising *ibu-ibu* from Pondok Indah, Jakarta.[51] As it turned out, the flow of discussion did not go very well. "There seems to be a disconnection (*gak nyambung*) between Mamah Dedeh and the

[50] Interview held with the producer in ANTV on 26 Apri 2012.

[51] Pondok Indah is one among few posh and leafy residential areas in South Jakarta, where members of the country's elite society live.

congregation." Here lies the imperative and rationalisation for the dumbing-down effect.

Religious Commodification

Kitiarsa (2008) argues that religious commodification is a "complex historical and cultural construction" that does not necessitate the arrival of "religious malaise", or even "produce new religious forms and movements that oppose the institutionalised beliefs and practices of religious organisations", but requires "an understanding of cultural frameworks in order to unlock their symbolic and socio-economic significance". According to Kitiarsa (2008: 3):

> It is theoretically appropriate to situate religious commodification in Asia within a broad conceptual spectrum of secularisation and its counter-model. This commodification is deemed to turn religion into marketable goods, bringing them into various scales and modes of market transaction.

In the case of Indonesian *Dakwahtainment*, it is wholly apparent that the commodity here is Islam, and that the targeted consumers are the burgeoning Indonesian Muslim middle class.

Undoubtedly, the trend seems to suggest that it is Muslim women who are the main target for these *Dakwahtainment* programmes. The reason for this may be quite simply because many Muslim homemakers in Indonesia have time on their hands and, most importantly, power to purchase the derivative products that go along with the marketisation of religion. Casual observation of the good looks, charming personality and religious outlook of the male preachers suggests that the television executives also know what the female mass audience desires to see. There may be a different but similar effect when Muslim female

audiences view the strong personality of Mamah Dedeh, who can inspire women to be emotionally strong and financial independent. All in all, the audience is trapped in the logic of the television industry. As I have argued elsewhere:

> The Indonesian audience – comprising mostly women homemakers sitting in the studio and in their homes – become addicted to such *Dakwahtainment* programmes, and ultimately often get caught up in the web of industrial interests, conveniently wrapped in religious fervour (Sofjan 2012: 60-61).

Two of the most banal practices of religious commodification in *Dakwahtainment* programmes can be seen in the tariffs set for the celebrity *ustads* and in the use of Islamic symbolism to market consumer products to targeted Muslim consumers. The tariff logic is that these preachers' only occupation is *dakwah*; therefore fees deriving from their services should be compensated. Hence, all *Dakwahtainment* programmes in Indonesia normally apply such tariff systems. What seem abnormal are the phenomenal rates they set, dependent on the revenue generated from the corporate advertisements sponsoring each programme.

The assumption that religion affects consumers' preference to consume products positively and significantly is in no way universal. The logic follows that producers will use religious symbolism to help boost the marketability of their products. However, empirical evidence from the United States suggests otherwise. Weatherby and Pugh (2008) examine religious symbolism in television commercials in the U.S., using content analysis. Their findings suggest that television advertisers are reluctant to use religion to help sell their products. Only a small amount of advertisements "had religious or spiritual content".

Given such circumstances, responsibility cannot be wholly put on the shoulders of the media executives, who operate largely on a hyper-rationalist, materialist and capitalist basis, where profits dictate the longevity of a programme and even the career of a celebrity preacher. Thus, part of the blame should go the facilitators and regulators, in this case the government. Ustadz Mansyur agrees. He argues:

> The Ministry of Religious Affairs is partly to blame. They are part of the problem, not the solution. I was once invited to attend one of its meetings, and a high-ranking official said that the Ministry will strive to help the preachers to have similar incentives as the celebrities on television. We will guarantee that your rights are equal to the celebrities. Can you imagine?[52]

The problem posed by Ustadz Mansyur here relates to the incentive and wealth accumulation by the supposed celebrity preachers. Public cynicism towards them centres mostly on the tariffs set by the managers of these *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs.* One report mentioned a famous celebrity *ustadz*, whose tariff stands at Rp.12-15 million (equivalent to US$1200-1500) per hour. Another young *ustadz*, who was part of the *Pemburu Hantu* team, is said to own six extravagant houses amounting to tens of billions of rupiahs. Another young and handsome *ustadz*, who supposedly repented from living a life as a drug addict and womaniser, now earns around Rp.40-50 million (equivalent to US$4,000-5,000) for every hour of his televised series to call Muslims to the faith. For lesser events at the level of high schools or universities, the fee for one sermon is Rp.20 million (around US$2,200), where Rp.10 million is said to be for charity at the *ustadz's* choosing, and the other Rp.10

[52] Idem.

million for his travel expenses with family members and personal assistants.[53]



A recent case of tariff-setting involved Ustad Solmed, one of themost popular, or at least most visible, preachers on Indonesian television. A recent flood of news reported how he had allegedly turned down a *dakwah* invitation to Hong Kong in mid-2013 from the Indonesian Muslim community called the *Thoriqul Jannah* (the path to heaven). The invitation supposedly included a fee of HK$6,000 and return airfare for two. However, according to the organiser, who represents the thousands of Indonesian Muslim migrant workers in Hong Kong, Ustadz Solmed asked for more (HK$10,000), arguing that based on the plan the congregation would be asked to contribute money to take part in the event. In Ustadz Solmed's defence, it was said that he was willing to go to Hong Kong, even without pay, if the organiser would not ask for a contribution from the audience. Regardless of where the truth lies, the reputation of Ustadz Solmed has been negatively affected, and ever since the tariff-setting scheme among preachers has been debated in public. This is where the major discontent with *Dakwahtainment* is found. Nurul Yamin of *Universitas Muhamadiyah Yogyakarta* (UMY) argues:

> *Dakwahtainment* hides a serious dualism. On the one hand, *dakwah* on television can be highly effective, but on the other hand, television is part

[53] Information derived from one person who once invited Uje to his high school reunion.

> and parcel of popular culture, which in it contains the ideology of capitalism ... (Thus), *Dakwahtainment* becomes a challenge to the scholars of *dakwah* (Islamic propagation) because they are part of the construction that is very much influenced by the current mode of production and media people.[54]

On religious commodification, one high-ranking official from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Professor M. Machasin, said, "To resolve this issue, we must first determine whether dakwah originates from a 'calling of the heart' (*panggilan jiwa*) or a profession."He argued that if *dakwah* were borne out of the sincere intention to spread the Word of Allah and the Message of Islam, then the tariff system may seem in appropriate and even unethical. However, if *dakwah* were to be regarded as a "profession", then it would understand ably require professional fees to be paid to the professional preachers, whose full-time occupation is to call people to the faith.

Another aspect of the commodification of religion is the use of celebrity *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs* as instruments of the market. The commercialisation of products on television or other media in Indonesia has yet to escape the influence of religion. Many celebrity *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs* lend themselves too much to the market and allow their public *personae* to be used by the corporate industry for branding and product promotion to the large Indonesian Muslim body of consumers.

Again, we see the serious effect of the mediatisation of Islam in reducing Islam to a form of entertainment viewing while turning the faithful into blind consumers of the products generated by the

[54] "Dakwahtainment: Tantangan Bagi Sarjana Dakwah" in Republika daily (undated: p.12).

Dakwahtainment industry. For the most part, *Dakwahtainment* programmes provide huge economic benefits to television executives, as well as the celebrity *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs*, who have forsaken the needs of ordinary Muslims seeking religious advice and enlightenment or of those who try to pursue an authentic and ethical way of life consistent with Islamic values.

Ethical Shortcomings

This section will discuss *Dakwahtainment* within the ethical framework of Islam. It delves into the many ways in which Indonesian television has persistently undermined some of the core principles and values entrenched in Islam's normative religious ethics.

As a matter of principle, Islam forbids the peddling of God's religion for worldly gain. This is unambiguously supported by the Quran, which stipulates: "And believe in what I reveal, confirming the revelation which is with you, and be not the first to reject Faith therein, nor sell My Signs for a small price; and fear Me, and Me alone."The portion of the verse that prohibits it – *wa laa tasytaruu bi aayaatii tsamanan qaliilan* – refers to those who sell the Words of Allah for the purposes of gaining fame, fortune and other worldly pleasures such as influence, power and glory.

Other verses in the Quran, notably in the chapter on Huud, speak with a similar tone to that of the Prophet, who said: "And O my people! I ask you for no wealth in return: my reward is from none but Allah".In the same chapter, again, the Prophet Huud (SA) lamented, "O my people! I ask of you no reward for this (Message). My reward is from none but Him who created me: Will ye not then understand?"In another

chapter of the Quran, the same sentiment against the sellers of religion is further emphasised: "No reward do I ask of you for it: my reward is only from the Lord of the Worlds."

It is not only the Quran, however, that has pre-empted this negative habit among members of the religious class. Numerous Prophetic sayings point to such similar prohibition. One well-known *hadist* recalls how the Prophet Muhammad advised Muslims to beware of *ulama su'* (mischievous religious scholars). He forewarned the Muslims, "Disaster will strike my community from the *ulama su'*, or those whose knowledge is utilised to gain worldly pleasures, prestige and position (in society)." Another famous and reliable *hadist* recounts one occasion when the Prophet Muhammad said, "Recite the Quran and intend it for Allah, before the arrival of a group of people who would recite the Quran and converts the Quran as a tool to seek wealth."

As the Prophet and Messenger of God, Muhammad is said always to surround himself with orphans, the poor and the destitute. This inclination was most likely derived from his unfortunate childhood, when Muhammad was born and raised as an orphan and taken into custody by his loving uncle. And although the family of the young Muhammad held an outstanding position in Meccan society, and therefore was not nearly as destitute, Muhammad had more than his fair share of economic hardship, especially during the early part of the revelation, when the Meccan ruling class, some of which were his direct relatives, disowned him. Despite the hardship, he kept his noble attitudes, maintained fair dealings even with his enemies, and always spoke the truth. Hence, he was known in Mecca as *Al-Amin* (the trusted one). Thus, during the early phase of Islamic propagation, Muhammad did not display any symptom of being a celebrity preacher in Mecca, much

less requesting wealth for the universal message he was about to spread to the Arab world and beyond.[55]

Imam Ali ibn Abu Thalib (AS) too cautioned against "selling salvation". In his word of advice to Kumayl bin Ziyad Nakha'i, the spiritual leader said:

> Look Kumayl! Here I hold stores and treasures of knowledge. I wish I could find somebody to share it with me. Yes, I found a few, but one of them, though quite intelligent, was untrustworthy, he would sell his salvation to get hold of the world and its pleasures, he would make religion a pretence to grasp worldly power and wealth, he would make this Blessing of Allah (knowledge) serve him to get supremacy and control over friends of Allah and he would through knowledge exploit and suppress other human beings.[56]

On another occasion, Imam Ali also wrote to Qutham bin Abbas, the brother of Abdullah bin Abbas, who was his governor in the province of Hijaz:

> These people have no eyes for truth and no ears for the Orders of Allah and sayings of the Holy Prophet(s). They are trying to reach the path of religion through wrong ways and to acquire worldly wealth and pleasure under the pretence of religious activities. Not only this, but they are also trying in various ways to persuade noble and pious persons to sell their salvation to the possession of pleasures of this life. They are serving their vicious ruler by sinning against Allah and man. (218)

From the above line of argument, it is clear that the Quran, Prophetic traditions and the teachings of spiritual leaders – as the primary sources of Islamic jurisprudence – consider teaching and preaching the Word of Allah in return for worldly gains as impermissible and even

[55] Muhammad's steadfastness serves as a strong modality for Islam, considering that numerous worldly pleasures were offered by the Meccan ruling elite, who were worried that the religious teachings and the liberating message of the Prophet would ultimately destroy the existing status quo and render them equal to others, including the slaves.

[56] For all citations of Imam Ali, Jafery's (undated) Nahjul Balagha Hazrat Ali.

reprehensible. That the Prophet uses the term *ulama su'* in itself denotes his outright disapproval for such behaviour. The same holds true for the words of Imam Ali when he warns against selling salvation and religion for worldly pleasures and self-aggrandisement.

Indeed, this serves as a basic principle and an ethical framework for Islamic *dakwah*. For if Islamic propagation were to be based on structures of economic incentive or the Messenger were to derive compensation for teaching and preaching, it would have been extraordinarily difficult and perhaps impossible to spread the Message beyond those who could "purchase salvation" or those who sought worldly gains. This would undoubtedly have proven counterproductive for Islam, which prides itself on being a liberation movement for social justice, and constantly strives to defend the *mustadh'afiin* (the weak or the oppressed).

It is conceivable to think that there would be those who would criticise this line of thinking and see compensation for the preachers within the framework of "helping one another". The counter-argument would thus rationalise and justify such a proposition as being consistent with a part of the verse in the Quranic chapter entitled *Al-Ma'idah* (5: 2), which reads as follows: "Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour: fear Allah: for Allah is strict in punishment".

The other related issue concerns the extravagant lifestyles of these celebrity *ustads*. Many engage in celebrity-like lifestyles and are habitually absorbed in a sense of self-grandeur, feeding directly their self-glorification and self-exaltation. Ustad Solmed,for instance, a rising star in the industry who recently married for the second time with a celebrity, is as much present in the *dakwah* scene as he is in the

infotainment programmes. In the latter, much of the coverage is on his newly adopted lifestyle as a celebrity *ustad*, who often takes infotainment journalists on a tour of his luxury home, even as far as the comfort of his bedroom. The extravagance does not stop there. On the pretext of targeting young cosmopolitan Muslims, Aa Gym, Ustadz Solmed and Ustadz Jeffry, who died recently in a crash, have also been huge enthusiasts for Harley Davidsons and other such motorcycles.

Many of these celebrity *ustads* are thus prone to *riya'* (self-admiration), which in itself can destroy one's faith and sincerity. *Riya'* connotes good deeds that please God, but with the ulterior motive or intention of making those other than God admire the person engaging in the good deed. Here, the use of infotainment programmes and the mass media are strategic for these celebrity *ustads*. It is often found that these celebrity *ustads* will invite infotainment journalists to cover their charity work, giving food to the orphans, or preparing a spiritual journey for the *'umrah* (minor pilgrimage). This is usually done with fanfare and pomp, inviting journalists, photographers, cameramen, celebrities and Jakarta socialites. When interviewed close up, they typically argue playfully that such events have been part of their life long habits and come purely from their intention *untuk berbagi kebahagiaan* (to share their happiness with others).

Riya' in Islam, notably in *Irfan* (theosophical knowledge), clearly presents a grave problem, directly connected to the solemn affairs of the heart. The basic Islamic principle is that "when the right hand gives, the left hand shall not know". Ayatullah Ruhullah Khomeini, for instance, in his famous book of ethics entitled *Chihil Hadist* (40 prophetic traditions), dealt with *riya'* as among the foremost evils committed by the human heart. Drawing on Yazid ibn Khalifah, Imam

Ja'far al-Sadiq (AS) once said, "*Riya'* in any of its forms amounts to *shirk* (polytheism); verily, one who works for the people, his reward lies with them, and one who works for God his reward lies with God."[57] Imam Khomeini commented on the *hadist* on *riya'* as follows:

> *Riya'* means to falsely make oneself appear to be virtuous, good natured or a true believer in God before the people for the sake of earning their respect and admiration, or with the purpose of gaining good reputation among them. The hypocrite feigns integrity, uprightness, virtue, honesty and piety without an authentic intention of acquiring these traits for the sake of God.

Furthermore, Khomeini believes that *riya'* can be tantamount to partnering Allah, which in effect could destroy one's good deeds and, over time, faith in God.



[57] Ja'far al-Sadiq is the sixth imam in the lineage, according to the branch of Twelver Shia Islam (Itsna Asyariyah), which the predominant school in Iran and most of the Shia world.