

Covert Threats within the Core System of Human Spiritual Development: An Explanatory Model for Spiritual Psychopathology

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Abstract

Introduction and Objectives: One of the central issues in the study of religion and the psychology of religion is the problem of threats to faith. In addition to overt threat agents, there exists a category of *silent and covert threats* that operate without explicit markers, functioning through the *gradual erosion of the psychological fabric of faith*. The aim of the present study is to identify these *covert threat agents to faith* and to analyze their psycho-social mechanisms, through which faith is diminished from within, ultimately leading to spiritual-psychological harm. The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative content analysis applied within the framework of Islamic studies, complemented by a psychological interpretive approach to religious texts. The findings indicate that, in this domain, four covert factors operate, each of which diminishes faith through its own distinct psychological mechanisms:

1. Astonishment, operating through the formation of a “*halo of wonder*”;
2. Reverential Awe (khashyah driven deference), functioning through the inherent tendency of *being overpowered by perceived greatness*;
3. Fear of reproach, activated through the *innate human fear of social discreditation*;



4. Feelings of loneliness (wahshah), operating through the activation of the *instinctive drive to avoid isolation*.

Collectively, these covert factors lead either to blind conformity or to blind denial, both of which contribute to the internal erosion of faith and subsequent spiritual–psychological harm.

Accordingly, this model can be employed both to explain spiritual psychopathology and to design a program of spiritual therapy.

Keywords: Threats to Faith, Astonishment, Reverential Awe, Fear of Reproach, Loneliness, Spiritual Psychopathology, Spiritual Therapy.

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Statement of the Problem

In religious texts, faith is conceived as a vital, living, and multidimensional reality, defined through inner affirmation (cordial assent), verbal profession, and outward action. Qur’anic verses explicitly indicate this threelayered structure of faith (alHujurāt 49:14; alBaqarah 2:2–5), and Hadith sources likewise portray faith as a gradual, multileveled phenomenon that is susceptible to increase or decrease. Accordingly, faith is not a static condition, but rather a fluid, sensitive process that is contingent upon both internal and external conditions.

According to Miller and Krumrei (2014), during the second half of the twentieth century, the concept of religiosity was predominantly understood as an organized system of beliefs and rituals associated with an institutional structure, whereas the term spirituality referred to a personal quest for, and connection with, the sacred, occurring either within or outside a formal religion. Nevertheless, in recent years, many scholars have found the relationship between these concepts to be relatively complex (Hill et al., 2000; Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

For example, numerous studies have shown that the general public tends to understand these terms in somewhat different ways (Matisse, 2000; Schlehofer, Omoto, & Adelman, 2008; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Moreover, a substantial proportion of American citizens describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind both the inherent complexity of the definitions of these concepts and the relative paucity of research activities conducted by scholars in this field (Miller & Krumrei, 2014).

In the psychology of religion, faith is a multidimensional and complex construct that has been defined and analyzed from various perspectives. Within this field, faith is not understood merely as religious belief; rather, it is examined as a psychological–meaningful construct, an affective relationship, an existential trust, a cognitive–emotional process, and an internalized religious process. Some scholars have conceptualized faith as a “meaningmaking structure” (Paloutzian & Park, 2013), which enables individuals to interpret and make sense of life experiences, including both suffering and success, and to construe the surrounding world. In theories of faith development, faith is further regarded as a fundamental affective relationship between the human being and the Transcendent.

In theories of faith development, some scholars conceptualize faith as a form of existential trust, defining it as the “courage to be”—that is, an ultimate trust in the meaningfulness of life in the face of forces of meaninglessness, despair, and existential crises such as death, loneliness, and anxiety (Tillich, 1957; Fowler, 1981). In other theoretical frameworks, faith has been defined as a cognitive–emotional construct by Pargament (1997), encompassing a sustained cognitive and emotional engagement with religious concepts, God, meaning, prayer, and hope.

One of the central concerns in religious studies and the psychology of religion is the issue of threats to faith. Within the psychology of religion, religious change is analyzed as a complex psychosocial process that encompasses multiple dimensions, including identity, existential crises, social networks, and cultural factors. In contemporary psychology, religious change is not conceptualized as a sudden or discrete event; rather, it is understood as a dynamic process of identity reconstruction that emerges through a complex interaction of psychological, social, and cultural factors. At its core, this phenomenon constitutes a response to existential crises—such as death anxiety, nihilism, or emotional failures—that propel individuals toward the search for new meaningmaking systems (Paloutzian et al., 2023). Empirical studies indicate that in approximately 70% of cases, religious change originates—prior to any doctrinal or beliefbased transformation—from a loss of belonging within previously established social networks. In particular, rejection or exclusion from one’s family or initial religious community creates the psychological conditions necessary for the acceptance of a new identity, thereby facilitating the process of religious change (Smith & Snell, 2009).

Explanatory models of this process are primarily grounded in two key perspectives. The first is Rambo’s fivestage model (Rambo, 1993), which conceptualizes religious change as the outcome of an interaction among cultural context, emotional crises, active seeking, engagement with a new religious community, and, ultimately, identity commitment. The second is identity crisis theory, which—drawing on neuropsychological evidence—conceptualizes religious change as a strategy for resolving selfimage conflicts during transitional life periods, particularly adolescence and midlife. Neuroimaging studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) have demonstrated that during

religious change, activity in self-referential neural networks within the prefrontal cortex increases significantly (Emmons, 2024).

In Islamic sources, threats to faith are commonly identified in the form of factors such as epistemic denial, intellectual doubts, public sins, conflicts of interest, and explicit social pressures. These threats are typically direct, tangible, and readily identifiable, and religious literature has repeatedly issued warnings against them. Among the factors regarded as detrimental to religion in Islamic texts are the corrupt jurist, the oppressive ruler, the ignorant devotee, suspicion, greed, worldliness, envy, self-admiration, and boastfulness (Mohammadi Reyshahri, 2010, Vol. 4, p. 183, *Āfāt alDīn*). In essence, **sin** is introduced as a set of antifaith behaviors, and strong emphasis is placed on the preservation of religion (ibid., p. 183, *alḤathth ‘alā alḤifāz ‘alā alDīn*) and its safeguarding (ibid., p. 201, *Ṣiyānat alDīn bilDunyā*).

Beyond these categories of threats, there exists another class of active yet covert threats that operate in a low-visibility manner and have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. These threats do not manifest through explicit negation or overt opposition to faith; rather, they function imperceptibly through the gradual erosion of the psychological fabric of faith. The defining characteristic of these threats is their nonsalience: instead of delivering a direct blow, they progressively undermine the internal process of faith by disrupting the individual's perception, meaningmaking, emotional regulation, and psychological sense of security. Such threats are sustained by specific mechanisms that are typically activated through emotional, social, or cognitive elements, without the individual necessarily being aware that their faith is undergoing deterioration. These influences may originate from core human emotions, chronic psychological pressures, or the structural features of social relationships, and tend to manifest in the form of gradual convergence, mild and diffuse doubt, or value-based passivity.

Given the gradual and subcutaneous nature of these threats, their identification and analysis from both religious and psychological perspectives are essential. Insufficient recognition of such threat agents creates conditions for the progressive erosion of faith among religious individuals, while simultaneously obscuring the origins of many negative spiritual transformations at both the individual and social levels. Within the con-

temporary cultural–social context, phenomena such as diminished faithbased resilience, gradual disengagement from religion, and deep yet silent doubts regarding the foundational tenets of religion have become increasingly observable. A significant portion of this situation is not attributable to explicit intellectual doubts, but rather to covert threats that have not been adequately recognized or systematically analyzed. Understanding these factors constitutes a fundamental necessity for the pathology of modern religiosity, religious education, and cultural policymaking. Moreover, these factors play a crucial role in explaining patterns of spiritual psychopathology. Spiritual explanations of psychological disorders—from the vulnerability of the innate spiritual capacity with which human beings are naturally endowed (Janbozorgi, 2025), to the emergence of perceptual distortions, weaknesses in cognitive–spiritual processing, impaired coping with life challenges, and deficits in behavioral regulation or selfregulation (Janbozorgi, 2024)—collectively indicate that the role of these covert threat agents is particularly salient in the development and maintenance of psychological disorders.

Despite the importance of beliefs and faith in maintaining psychological wellbeing and emotional regulation, international evidence indicates that social pressures and group norms can substantially influence individuals’ religious perception, decisionmaking, and behavior. Research has shown that the tendency toward conformity with the group may, at times, occur even in opposition to personal beliefs and individual rationality, thereby giving rise to emotiondriven decisions and deviations from the path of faith (Religious Fundamentalism, 2025; Thiruchselvam et al., 2017). Conversely, religious beliefs and spirituality play a significant role in emotion regulation and coping with psychological stress, and can mitigate the adverse effects of social pressure (Dolcos et al., 2021; Pargament, 2004). Nevertheless, empirical studies that have systematically examined how social pressure, cognitive dysfunction, and weakened volitional and selfregulatory capacities interact with the stability of faith remain limited. By focusing on the framework of Khodasoo spiritual therapy, the present study seeks to address this gap and to elucidate the psychospiritual pathways through which faith is threatened. Nevertheless, empirical studies that have systematically examined how social pressure, cognitive dysfunction, and weakened volitional and selfregulatory capacities interact with the stability of faith

remain limited. By focusing on the framework of God-Oriented spiritual therapy (Kholdasoo), the present study seeks to address this gap and to elucidate the psychospiritual pathways through which faith is threatened.

The purpose of this study is to identify covert threats to faith and to analyze the psychosocial mechanisms through which they lead to an internal and gradual erosion of faith. These threats are considered covert insofar as they operate outside the individual's conscious awareness. The primary function of such covert agents is the progressive and dynamic reduction of the sense of existential and emotional security toward the object of love, which, in the present context, refers to God.

The central question addressed in this article is how definitive threats to faith, within the framework of spiritual or Islamic psychology, subtly and unconsciously redirect the trajectory of faith, and through which mechanisms this process unfolds. Addressing these questions can contribute to the pathology of faith, elucidate a wide range of spiritual deviations, and facilitate the development of intervention protocols aimed at enhancing individuals' resilience in the face of adversities, as well as the treatment of those entangled in harmful cognitive and spiritual challenges.

Method

With respect to data sources, this study is librarybased and grounded in verses of the Holy Qur'an and narrations (ḥadīths) of the Infallibles (peace be upon them). In terms of analytical approach, the research adopts qualitative content analysis. Methodologically, the study employs an integrative approach combining the classical methods of Islamic scholarship with a psychological framework for interpreting religious texts, known as the FARMAD method (Pasandideh, 2017). Following the conceptual formulation of covert threat agents, the researcher approached the Qur'an and ḥadīth corpus—considered the qualitative research population—from a psychological perspective and systematically collected relevant data. These data were subsequently organized into four principal thematic domains: astonishment (i'jāb), awe or reverential fear (khashyah), reproach (sarzanesh), and loneliness (waḥshah). Subsequently, a general interpretive understanding of the religious texts was undertaken, encompassing the analysis of lexical units and

composite expressions, the examination of contextual indicators (qarā'in), and the consideration of perspectives offered by Qur'anic exegetes and scholars of ḥadīth. In the next stage, in order to extract the psychological dimensions of the identified themes, the FARMAD method, a form of systematic qualitative content analysis, was applied. Within the FARMAD method, the direction of inquiry proceeds from text to theory. Accordingly, its foundational strategy is referred to as reverse research. This approach is centered on the discovery of latent psychological principles and rules embedded within religious texts, rather than on aligning or fitting these texts to preestablished psychological theories. Through a systematic analysis of the internal structure and intrinsic logic of the text, the researcher reconstructs the implicit problem addressed by the text, as well as the causal relationships among its constituent components. Through this reconstructive process, general principles and theoretical rules are extracted—principles that provide the foundation for the psychological explanation of religious teachings and for the production of indigenous theories grounded in the religious tradition.

Findings

The researcher's analyses indicate that, in addition to overt and explicitly identifiable factors, there exist other forces that operate covertly and pose serious threats to faith. The previously discussed factors constitute marked and overt threat agents—analogueous to clearly identifiable adversaries—that confront faith in a direct and explicit manner. However, there are other agents that threaten faith without bearing any explicit markers or visible signs. These agents are considerably more dangerous and destructive, precisely because of their hidden and nonsalient nature. These covert threats exert their influence not through direct confrontation, but through subtle psychological processes that gradually reshape perception, emotion, and meaningmaking. Within the present investigation, four covert threat agents were identified: astonishment, Reverential Awe, fear of reproach, and feelings of loneliness. In the following sections, each of these covert threats is systematically examined and reported.

Covert Threat Agent 1: Astonishment

One of the covert factors that threatens faith is astonishment toward certain phenomena, which can gradually displace the individual from the sphere of faith. Astonishment is a fundamental human emotion that can, at an unconscious level, bring about alterations in an individual's belief system.

According to Islamic sources, there exist specific instances and encounters that evoke astonishment in the individual. Such phenomena are referred to in the present study as triggers of astonishment or astonishing stimuli. More than one hundred verses in the Qur'an, expressed through diverse Arabic linguistic and rhetorical forms, explicitly depict the experience of astonishment and bear witness to the pervasiveness of wonder as a human emotional response. A number of these Qur'anic verses articulate human astonishment across different moral positions, encompassing both the righteous and the unrighteous. In some instances, astonishment is expressed in the context of praise and admiration (e.g., *Yusuf* 12:31), while in others it appears in the form of condemnation and denial (e.g., *Yunus* 10:2). Some of these verses portray human astonishment regardless of moral status, encompassing both the righteous and the unrighteous, and express astonishment either in the mode of praise and admiration (e.g., *Yusuf* 12:31) or in the mode of condemnation and denial (e.g., *Yunus* 10:2). Certain verses recount the astonishment of earlier generations within historical narratives or events (e.g., *alHijr* 15:15), whereas others report astonishment that will occur in the future (e.g., *TaHa* 20:125) (Encyclopaedia of the Holy Qur'an, Vol. 7, p. 607). Among the astonishing phenomena mentioned in the Qur'an are eloquence of speech (*alBaqarah* 2:204), physical beauty (*alBaqarah* 2:221), wellproportioned physique (*Sad* 38:4), material wealth and possession (*alTawbah* 9:55), spiritual worthiness or moral competence (*alA'raf* 7:63), numerical abundance (*alTawbah* 9:25), supernatural power (*Hud* 11:73), content-based novelty and superiority (*alJinn* 72:1), and even the denial of selfevident monotheistic truths, such as God, resurrection, and prophethood (*alRa'd* 13:5). An analysis of these verses indicates that three key elements are typically present: first, an astonishing agent, as discussed above; second, a life situation such as war, marriage, revelation, or childbirth; and third, a point of inattention, namely God and His capacities. In some cases, the verses also refer to the consequences of astonishment.

_ Accordingly, the Holy Qur'an states in these verses that at times eloquence of speech, physical beauty and attractiveness, or the wealth and possessions of others give rise to fascination, which diverts individuals from the right path, truth, and fundamental human norms. Manifestations of this diversion can be observed in core cognitive domains, such as disbelief, as well as in decisive life choices, such as marriage. In some Islamic traditions, aesthetic astonishment is regarded as a factor that generates doubt (*shubha*), which—through turning away from clear and evident proofs—leads to disbelief (*alKulaynī*, 1429 AH, vol. 4, p. 156). This beauty may also take the form of the allure of the worldly life, whereby astonishment with it led people to set aside God's appointed representatives (abandoning prophethood and imamate) and to install oppressors as the rulers of society instead (*Ibn Shu'ba*, p. 237).

_ At other times, a person's perceived eligibility for attaining the rank of messengership and prophethood, or God's extraordinary and unconventional action, becomes the object of denial, incredulity, and doubt. This, in turn, leads to alienation from faith in the divine prophets and from following and obeying them.

_ At times as well, the numerical strength and material resources (*'idda wa 'udda*) of nonbelievers generate attraction and captivation toward them, drawing individuals in their direction and distancing them from the sphere of faith. This process, in turn, may culminate in the loss of faith itself.

_ At other times, the unconventional nature of an act may lead to inattention to divine power and to a redirection of attention from the ultimate source of power toward human capability. This shift can create conditions conducive to deviation in developmentally immature individuals.

The covert nature of astonishment lies in the fact that, on the surface, it is not regarded as an antifaith phenomenon, nor is it classified among explicitly identifiable enemies of faith. Nevertheless, it operates in an imperceptible manner, gradually introducing changes that distance the individual from faith. To understand the manner in which this concealment functions, its underlying mechanism must be identified and examined.

The Mechanism of Astonishment

From the foregoing discussion, it has become clear that astonishment can covertly threaten the security of faith. The question, however, is how this occurs. It is now possible to turn to the mechanism through which astonishment exerts its influence. Employing reverse research within the FARMAD methodology, three fundamental insights concerning the phenomenon of astonishment can be identified.

1. *Existential Dimension*: Astonishment is one of the fundamental attributes of the human psyche, purposefully embedded within the existential structure of the human being. Findings from the psychology of selftranscendent emotions indicate that astonishment functions as a biological and cognitive mechanism that facilitates experiences of selftranscendence, directing individuals toward realities that are greater and more encompassing than the self (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Yaden et al., 2017). From a theological perspective, this characteristic may be understood as a manifestation of divine design, preparing human beings to perceive the grandeur of the Creator and to accept servitude (‘ubūdiyyah).

2. *Motivational and Arousal Dimension*: The arousal associated with astonishment is contingent upon an individual’s value system and internal evaluative criteria. Empirical studies indicate that, depending on their value orientations, individuals experience astonishment in response to natural, moral, or material phenomena (Gordon et al., 2017). Accordingly, the object of astonishment in each individual reflects the underlying structure of beliefs and values. When an individual’s evaluative standards are material and quantitative, astonishment is more likely to be elicited by manifestations of power or wealth; by contrast, when these standards are spiritual, astonishment is oriented toward the beauty and grandeur of the Divine.

3. *Functional Dimension*: Astonishment is a perceptual–emotional experience that can penetrate the belief system and religious faith. Empirical studies have demonstrated that experiences of astonishment are associated with heightened feelings of unity, spirituality, and greater openness to overarching values (Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012; Stellar et al., 2018). Accordingly, when this emotion is oriented toward divine grandeur, it can contribute to the strengthening of faith and humility; whereas its orientation toward worldly manifestations may increase feelings of intimidation and nondivine attachment.

It is now possible to explicate the mechanism underlying this influence. *Astonishment* arises when an individual encounters a phenomenon that is rare, unfamiliar, and to some extent enigmatic, as well as phenomena that are vast, overwhelming, or exceptionally positive or negative (Farāhīdī, 1409 AH, Vol. 1, p. 235; Ibn Fāris, 1404 AH, Vol. 4, p. 243; Rāghib, 1412 AH, Vol. 1, p. 547; Ibn Athīr, 1367 AH, Vol. 3, p. 184). Classical lexicographers have stated that *astonishment* occurs when a particular attribute in an object exceeds its customary or normative level (Authors, p. 185). Accordingly, astonishment appears to be a psychological state that emerges when a person is unexpectedly confronted with a salient and striking phenomenon, due to its rarity, unfamiliarity, atypicality, the concealment of its causal explanation, and related features.

Due to its striking, atypical, and unexpected nature, astonishment generates an affective state that operates through the formation of a halo of wonder. This halo of wonder produces an excessive attentional focus on the astonishing stimulus and establishes a dominant experiential field that influences and disrupts cognitive activity. In this condition, astonishment tends to emotionalize decisionmaking, leading to the temporary suspension or marginalization of rational and logical reasoning. Through this process, astonishment becomes capable of penetrating the domain of faith, exerting its influence upon it, and bringing about faithrelated changes aligned with its own orientation.

Recent psychological research conceptualizes awe (astonishment) as a complex and dualvalenced emotion that is elicited in response to atypical and unexpected phenomena. While awe can stimulate cognitive motivation, it simultaneously temporarily disrupts rational processing. According to the Cognitive Delay Model of Awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), the experience of awe is accompanied by a suspension or slowing of the analytical system, allowing the mind to apprehend the vastness or strangeness of the phenomenon encountered. Subsequent studies have shown that this emotion, by inducing hyperfocus on the source of astonishment and forming a cognitive halo around it, leads to a reduction in analytical processing and an increase in emotionbased judgments (Valdesolo & Graham, 2014). Neuropsychological findings further indicate that during the experience of awe, activity in the prefrontal regions of the brain—which are responsible for logical decisionmaking and cognitive inhibition—is diminished, while

emotional and reward-related systems become more active. This mechanism constitutes what may be termed the halo of wonder: an affective field that casts a shadow over cognitive processes, resulting in emotionalized decisionmaking and a weakening of analytical rationality.

The halo of wonder produces two opposing and mutually contradictory effects: it may lead either to blind obedience or to blind denial. In some cases, astonishment is so powerfully attractive that it draws the individual toward itself and induces uncritical compliance. This occurs when astonishing material attractions rise in opposition to faith and gradually pull the individual toward themselves. In other cases, however, astonishment generates such a degree of perceived implausibility that it drives the individual toward denial and confrontation. This typically happens when divine and spiritual realities, due to their nonconventional nature, are evaluated as irrational or unprincipled, prompting avoidance and withdrawal; through this process, the psychological security of faith becomes threatened.

Regulation of Astonishment

Astonishment and wonder, as psychological phenomena, appear to be part of the divinely designed constitution of the human being, reflecting an aspect of divine creativity. From this perspective, the human psychological system itself operates within the framework of God's creative order. Such a design cannot be inherently negative or flawed; rather, it undoubtedly possesses positive and constructive functions. Clear examples of this can be observed in the astonishment evoked by the rich and profound content of the Qur'anic verses, which facilitates acceptance and belief, as well as in the astonishment directed at the denial of self-evident monotheistic truths such as God, resurrection, and prophethood. These examples demonstrate that astonishment can also perform a positive function. Therefore, it is not astonishment itself that must be eliminated, but rather its regulation that is required. Accordingly, astonishment has been classified into two types: praiseworthy and blameworthy. Praiseworthy astonishment signifies satisfaction and approval, whereas *blameworthy astonishment* reflects **discontent and dissatisfaction* (Encyclopedia of the Qur'an, Vol. 7, p. 605).

The Holy Qur'an establishes a fundamental principle in this regard, articulated in Surah alMā'idah (5:100). The contextual structure of this verse is such that it appears to have been revealed independently, without a direct textual linkage to the verses preceding or following it; attempting to forcibly connect it to its surrounding context yields little interpretive benefit. Rather, the verse presents a general illustrative example employed by God to elucidate a defining characteristic of the true religion in contrast to other religions, as well as to depict human conduct toward both true and false religions. This defining characteristic is that validity and credibility, in all circumstances, belong to truth, even if the adherents of truth are few and numerically limited. Submission is therefore required before goodness and felicity, even when the majority of people—particularly the powerful—are inclined to resist or turn away from it. This is because truth, in its laws and normative systems, relies solely upon sound reason ('aql salīm); and it is inconceivable that sound reason would guide humanity toward anything other than the collective good and toward actions that reinforce the cohesion and order of society—regardless of whether those driven by base desires, who typically constitute the majority, approve or disapprove. Indeed, the cosmic order (Nizām alKawn) itself, as we observe it, follows nothing but sound and truthful principles, and it does not deviate in the slightest from its order to accommodate the inclinations of desiredriven individuals. For had truth followed the whims of people, the heavens and the earth would surely have fallen into corruption (*Ṭabāṭabā'ī*, 1995/1374 AH, vol. 6, p. 217).

Applying the FARMAD method to this noble verse reveals that the core issue addressed is astonishment at multitude (*kathrat alkhābīth*), while the desirable state is valuebased astonishment (*tayyib*). The corrective method proposed is cognition and mastery through reason (or selfregulation through reason). In this domain, we are confronted with polarities that require evaluation and discernment. These polarities manifest in two distinct forms. The first is a numerical polarity (minority–majority), which is rooted in a quantitative criterion. The second is a valuebased polarity (impure–pure), which is grounded in a qualitative or axiological criterion. These polarities are subjected to comparison and assessment. Human beings adopt a particular evaluative style when assessing the aforementioned polarities, operating in accordance with the criteria they select. Such

evaluation is conducted either on the basis of valuebased reasoning—that is, an examination of the intrinsic nature of phenomena—or on the basis of numerical reasoning, which focuses on the number of adherents or supporters. The activation of reason entails that the individual moves beyond the outward appearance of phenomena—namely, the number of their adherents—and turns instead to their inner core and essential substance. In religious discourse, this inner core is referred to as *lubb* (the innermost essence), and those who possess such depth of understanding are described as *ulū alalbāb* (people of inner reason). The Qur’an thus calls human beings to transcend superficial perception and adopt a mode of deep evaluation, urging them to examine phenomena not on the basis of numerical prevalence, but on the basis of value. In other words, the activation of reason enables individuals to reconfigure their evaluative polarity in accordance with the value and intrinsic nature of phenomena. It is for this reason that the Qur’an declares: *the impure and the pure are not equal, even if the abundance of the impure gives rise to astonishment.*

When, in the assessment of evaluative polarities, *lubb*-based reason—that is, a form of intellect oriented toward the inner core and essential substance of phenomena—is activated, the next stage that emerges is selfregulation. This selfregulatory capacity, referred to in religious discourse as *taqwā*, functions to restrain the impulses of the lower self and to counteract the attraction and pressure of the majority, thereby neutralizing their influence and securing the integrity of faith.

At the third stage, in order to further strengthen selfregulation, reason is activated in its futureoriented and consequenceevaluative dimension. Up to this point, reason had been engaged primarily in assessing the axiological nature of phenomena; here, however, it operates in the mode of consequence anticipation. Such anticipatory evaluation reveals that the ultimate outcome of a valuebased orientation is goodness and flourishing, whereas the ultimate outcome of a numerically driven orientation is evil and wretchedness. This form of evaluative foresight reinforces selfregulatory control and thereby facilitates the process of safeguarding faith.

Hidden Factor 2: Reverential Awe (Khashyah / خشيت)

Another covert factor that subtly threatens faith is awe, majesty, and overwhelming greatness. In religious literature, this state is referred to as *khashyah* (reverential awe). Although some scholars have defined it simply as *fear* (*khawf*) (*Farāhīdī*, 1409 AH, Vol. 4, p. 284; Azhari, 1421 AH, Vol. 7, p. 194), it is evident that these two terms are not synonymous. The precise meaning of *khashyah* denotes a form of fear accompanied by veneration and magnification, which arises through knowledge and awareness. Consequently, this state is regarded as being characteristic of scholars and people of understanding (Rāghib al-Ṣfahānī, 1412 AH, Vol. 1, p. 283). It appears that *khashyah* (reverential awe) is a composite state consisting of perceived majesty and grandeur, combined with respectful restraint and reverent regard. When an individual apprehends a form of greatness that is invested with sanctity and worth, a particular mode of fear and caution emerges. This state is, in fact, an integration of three interrelated components:

- (1) receptivity to awe—that is, being affected and influenced by perceived greatness;
- (2) attribution of respect to the possessor of that greatness; and
- (3) reverent selfrestraint in relation to it.

Under this formulation, the distinction between *khashyah* and mere *fear* (*khawf*) becomes evident. *Fear* primarily refers to an emotional response arising from the anticipation of painful consequences or harm, whereas *khashyah* denotes a form of reverent caution rooted in the cognitive recognition of magnitude, majesty, and sanctity. If the Divine is apprehended in a comprehensive and authentic manner, His grandeur and majesty become manifest, and *khashyah* (reverential awe) consequently emerges. For this reason, *khashyah* is specifically associated with scholars, as stated in the Qur'ān: “Only those of His servants who possess knowledge truly stand in reverential awe of God” (Qur'ān, 35:28). Among all servants, it is the scholars who attain the elevated station of *khashyah*, understood as a sense of responsibility-laden fear accompanied by a conscious recognition of the majesty of the Lord's مقام (divine rank) (Makarem Shirazi, 1992, Vol. 18, p. 247).

In Islamic sources, the object of awe and reverential apprehension (*haybah* / *khashyah*) is at times God, and at other times people (al-nās). This indicates that perceived grandeur and majesty, whether divine or social, possess a powerful capacity to influence human

judgment and behavior. At the same time, the contrast between these two objects of awe constitutes a highly meaningful opposition. In certain emotionally charged circumstances, some believers requested permission to engage in jihad; yet, once such permission was granted and the situation became actualized, they reacted contrary to expectation—expressing protest and withdrawal. The underlying reason was that they stood in awe of the perceived might and grandeur of the opposing people, fearing them in a manner comparable to—or even exceeding—their fear of God (Qur’ān, 4:77). Another instance appears when believers were required to confront the polytheists who had expelled the Prophet from Mecca; nevertheless, they refrained from compliance due to their awebased apprehension of the enemy’s power, and this reverential fear directly resulted in disobedience (Qur’ān, 9:13). At times, certain groups resisted the divine command and refused to submit to it; in such instances, the awe of people and the awe of God stand in direct opposition. Illustrations of this tension can be found in the narrative of the change of the qiblah (Qur’ān, 2:150) and in the acceptance of the Prophet’s authority and judgment (Qur’ān, 5:44). In other cases, the Messenger of God himself exhibited apprehension toward public reaction when conveying certain matters. Examples include the account of Zayd and Zaynab (Qur’ān, 33:37) as well as the episode of Ghadīr Khumm (Qur’ān, 5:3). This apprehension, however, was not motivated by personal interest, but rather by considerations of social consequence and communal sensitivity. The Qur’ān, by contrast, praises those who, when confronted by an enemy, regard the enemy’s power and intimidation as negligible, fearing only the grandeur and majesty of God (Qur’ān, 3:173), and who, in fulfilling divine obligations, stand in awe of nothing other than God (Qur’ān, 33:39).

The Mechanism of Reverential Awe

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that *khashyah*, or reverential awe, can exert a subtle and imperceptible influence on individuals’ faith. Based on the findings obtained through reverse inquiry using Formad’s method, Islamic sources reveal several fundamental psychological principles concerning the phenomenon of *khashyah* and the perception of greatness.

1. The Innate Principle of Responsiveness to Greatness: In accordance with the principle of divine creatorship, the human constitution has been endowed with an inherent capacity for responsiveness and affective receptivity toward perceived greatness. From the perspective of the psychology of selftranscendent emotions, awe (haybah / khashyah) constitutes an innate response to the experience of vastness, generating in the individual a sense of selfdiminishment alongside an openness to realities greater than the self (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). Within the framework of divine design, this characteristic functions as a cognitiveaffective instrument for apprehending servitude (*'ubūdiyyah*) and for acknowledging divine greatness.

2. The Dual Source of Greatness and the Role of the Value System: Psychological research has demonstrated that an individual's experience of awe toward a transcendent source—whether divine or human—is fundamentally moderated by the structure of one's value system (Gordon et al., 2017). When the perceived source of greatness is attributed to the Divine, awe tends to evoke humility, moral surrender, and ethical selfalignment (Stellar et al., 2018). Conversely, when greatness is anchored in human or social power, awe may give rise to intimidation, affective subjugation, and uncritical compliance (Valdesolo & Graham, 2014).

3. Impact on the Belief and Faith System: The experience of greatness and reverential awe (khashyah) possesses the capacity to reshape religious beliefs and faithrelated orientations. Empirical studies have demonstrated that awe can significantly influence moral orientation, religious faith, and ethical decisionmaking (Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012; Piff et al., 2015). These findings indicate that awe and khashyah are not merely transient emotional states, but rather formative components in the construction and maintenance of the human belief system—a phenomenon that is likewise reflected in Islamic sources, wherein the perception of divine greatness is presented as intrinsically linked to faith.

At this stage, the mechanism of reverential awe (khashyah) can be articulated. Awesusceptibility has the capacity to render human beings overawed and submissive. The underlying basis of this awe and apprehension is responsiveness to greatness. Human beings are created in such a way that they are overpowered by perceived greatness. In other words, a fundamental psychological characteristic of humans is their tendency to be subdued and

influenced by greatness, a tendency that ultimately leads individuals either to submit to the divine command or to oppose it. This outcome depends on whether greatness is attributed to people or to God! If an individual's psychological structure is such that it is characterized by anxiety toward the greatness of people, that individual becomes subject to social pressure arising from the withdrawal of certain members of society from the divine command and, ultimately, fails to accept the divine ruling. By contrast, when an individual experiences *khashyah* and apprehension toward divine greatness, they come under the compelling influence of the divine command itself and, under no circumstances, turn away from God's ordinance.

Empirical studies have shown that the experience of greatness activates emotional systems and temporarily attenuates self-focused processing, thereby producing a sense of self-diminishment, which in turn increases acceptance of and compliance with the source of awe. This effect occurs through perceptual focus on the magnitude and majesty of the source and a concomitant reduction in critical evaluation, functioning in essence as a mechanism for social adaptation and the recognition of authority. Accordingly, the human psychological system is organized in such a way that it exhibits a submissive response in the presence of perceived greatness. At the cognitive level, this response is accompanied by a reduction in prefrontal cortex activity and a heightened activation of the limbic system (Van Elk et al., 2019; Stellar et al., 2018). Accordingly, the individual's psychological orientation toward the source of greatness proves decisive in determining the trajectory of obedience: when greatness is attributed to God, *khashyah* leads to a deepening of faith and stability in obedience; however, when greatness is ascribed to human beings or social institutions, the very same psychological mechanism may result in passivity and submission to nondivine powers, thereby undermining faith.

Regulation of Reverential Awe

As established in the preceding discussions, awe directed toward people and awe directed toward God constitute the two poles of *khashyah*. In this sense, reverential awe is oriented either toward human agents or toward the Divine, while the underlying psychological mechanism remains the same in both cases. This indicates that *khashyah* is subject

to regulation, in that its effects are determined not by the mechanism itself, but by the orientation of its object. In reality, God the Exalted has designed reverential responsiveness to greatness and awe as an immutable psychological mechanism within the human constitution; however, He has granted human beings agency in regulating its orientation, namely, in determining where and toward what this capacity is exercised. To regulate this disposition, the Qur'an employs several pedagogical strategies. At times, it delineates the consequences of being influenced by the awe of people, describing it as a loss incurring transaction that culminates in disbelief (Qur'an 5:44). At other times, it articulates the outcome of accepting the divine judgment, namely prosperity and guidance (Qur'an 2:150). Elsewhere, the Qur'an contrasts the triviality of worldly gain with the Hereafter, portraying the forfeiture of the abundant reward of the Hereafter—due to susceptibility to human greatness—as a profound loss (Qur'an 4:77).

It appears that the appraisal of consequences plays a decisive role in the regulation of *khashyah*. Notably, these consequences may be real or imagined. Individuals who are responsive to greatness engage in consequence-oriented thinking in both cases; however, the nature of this anticipation differs. Those who are wary of the awe of people base their responses on imagined, ineffective, or minimally consequential outcomes, whereas those who are guided by reverential awe of God ground their orientation in real consequences with certain and destiny-shaping effects. Here, the mode of consequence anticipation constitutes the critical issue. Throughout all these processes, the activation of reason occupies a primary and determining role. The Qur'anic presentation of the harmful consequences of being influenced by the awe of people, on the one hand, and the beneficial outcomes of responsiveness to the awe and majesty of God, on the other, collectively functions as a direct challenge to human reason, urging it to revise its evaluative model. This revision entails a shift from the visible multitude (people) to the invisible One (God), from imagined efficacy to real efficacy, and from immediate yet unstable gain (the world) to deferred yet enduring benefit. It may therefore be argued that responsiveness to greatness is governed by consequence appraisal, and that the appraisal of consequences plays a decisive role in determining the mode of responsiveness to greatness. When attention is directed to the negative consequences of conforming to the majority, responsiveness to the greatness of

people recedes, and responsiveness to the greatness of God takes its place. Conversely, when consequences are disregarded, reverential responsiveness to God fails to emerge. In effect, the acceptance or rejection of divine judgment is contingent upon individual personality dispositions, specifically whether one is inclined toward submission to human greatness or toward submission to the greatness of God. Elsewhere, the Qur'an recalls and activates people's belief in God so that they do not accord weight to nondivine awe (Qur'an 9:13). It also attributes the increase in faith of those who were confronted with a numerous people to their reliance upon God (Qur'an 3:173).

It appears that evaluating the source of reverential restraint also plays a significant role. That is to say, when the source of reverential awe is either God or people, the question initially arises as to which exerts a greater and deeper influence. Yet this formulation may be misleading. When the contrast is between God and the nondivine, it is inappropriate to speak in terms of *greater influence*; rather, the proper distinction lies between that which possesses real efficacy and that which merely exerts illusory influence. Accordingly, evaluating the efficacy of each source of perceived greatness is also crucial. Once a source is recognized as possessing real efficacy, the illusory source inevitably fades and loses its influence. When people of faith declare that "*God is sufficient*," this stance is itself the outcome of an efficacybased evaluation. Therefore, discriminating between real efficacy and illusory influence plays a pivotal role in the regulation of reverential awe.

In this context, alongside the activation of reason, the activation of faith also becomes evident. It appears that under social conditions in which an individual is confronted with the numerical magnitude of people, faith and established beliefs are temporarily set aside, and evaluation and action proceed instead on the basis of egodriven or satanic beliefs. God, however, puts individuals' faith to the test, drawing it out of a state of passivity into one of effective operation. The outcome of this activation is the recognition of God as the real efficacious agent, while the perceived efficacy of people is regarded as illusory. With the activation of these two elements, the illusory efficacy attributed to the perceived greatness of people is neutralized, and the awe and majesty of God take its place and become effective. One may therefore regard Godoriented reason as the point of convergence between reason and faith.

Hidden Factor 3: Fear of Reproach

Among the other hidden factors is fear of reproach. *Reproach* refers to a form of blame and denigration directed at an existing deficiency, an act that leaves a profound and harsh psychological impact (Farāhīdī, 1409 AH, Vol. 8, p. 343; Jawharī, 1376 AH, Vol. 5, p. 2034). By *fear of reproach* is meant the fear of being reproached by others, a phenomenon that is referred to in Islamic sources by the expression “lawmat lā'im” (the blame of a blamer). The Noble Qur'an, in Surah al-Mā'idah (5:54), refers to a condition that may lead some individuals out of faith. In this verse, God emphasizes that worthy and faithful individuals, in the path of faith, do not fear reproach or blame. Moreover, in numerous narrations, the expression “lawmat lā'im” (the blame of a blamer) is repeatedly observed. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), when dispatching Mu'adh to Yemen, advised him to teach people all aspects of Islam, both minor and major—particularly prayer—and not to fear reproach in the path of worshiping God (Ibn Shu'bah, p. 25). Likewise, in the Prophet's counsels to Abū Dharr, he repeatedly emphasized the necessity of not fearing reproach in two distinct situations (al-Ṭūsī, 1414 AH, p. 539). Moreover, Imam 'Alī (peace be upon him) states that fearlessness of reproach was among the constant exhortations of the Prophet of Islam (al-Ṭūsī, 1414 AH, p. 522). Beyond this, he also counts the absence of fear of reproach as one of the defining characteristics of the Prophet's true followers (Sharīf al-Raḍī, 1395 AH, p. 302). Imam 'Alī (peace be upon him), while exhorting to jihad and emphasizing the establishment of divine ordinances, explicitly stresses that one must not fear reproach (Sharīf al-Raḍī, *Letter 31*). Likewise, when appointing Abū Bakr as the governor of Egypt, he advises him that in calling people to guidance and reform, he should not be afraid of reproach (al-Mufīd, 1404 AH, p. 260). Furthermore, in a letter addressed to Ḥudhayfah, the governor of alMadā'in, Imam 'Alī underscores that in carrying out his entrusted missions in the path of God, he should not fear the reproach of others (alDaylamī, 1398 AH, vol. 2, p. 321). In another narration describing the conditions of the End Times, it is reported that a group will emerge who sell their faith, abandon enjoining what is right, and neglect their moral responsibilities. The narration concludes with the instruction that such individuals should be repudiated inwardly (with the heart), addressed verbally, and that one should not fear reproach in doing so (alKulaynī, 1429 AH, vol. 9, p. 483).

Across the Qur’anic verse and the corpus of narrations, a recurrent pattern emerges: those who seek to implement divine commandments, practice religiosity, and defend truth are consistently confronted by opposing groups who mobilize against them through organized social currents, subjecting them to blame and reproach. Such social threat or pressure may generate social fear, which can ultimately lead individuals to withdraw from faith and from acting upon it.

The Mechanism of Fear of Reproach

We maintain that reproach can subtly and imperceptibly alter human behavior and beliefs. Based on reverse research conducted within the FARMAD method, three fundamental observations emerge concerning the phenomenon of reproach.

1. Reactive Disposition toward Reproach: Human beings are innately sensitive to blame and reproach. This sensitivity constitutes part of the psychological design of the human person, in which social status and social validity are regarded as significant. Empirical studies indicate that threats to reputation or social standing elicit strong emotional reactions, and that with the activation of the limbic system, levels of anxiety and feelings of shame increase (Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Eisenberger, 2012).

2. Activation of Fear of Social Rejection: Reproach operates by triggering the fear of social rejection and the loss of social acceptance. Social psychological studies demonstrate that when individuals are threatened with social punishment or public censure, a fearofrejection response (fear of social rejection) is activated. This fear, in turn, increases tendencies toward conformity and behavioral alignment with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Will et al., 2016).

3. Penetration into Belief and Faith Systems : Sensitivity to reproach and the fear of social rejection can extend beyond overt behavior and penetrate individuals’ belief and value systems. In order to restore social credibility and regain acceptance, individuals may realign their beliefs with collective norms and prevailing social standards. In social and cognitive psychology, this phenomenon is conceptualized as social influence on belief systems (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Fiske, 2010).

At this point, the mechanism can be articulated more clearly. The operative mecha-

nism of reproach is the fear of reputational damage and the loss of social credibility. Reproach threatens an individual's social standing and perceived worth, precisely because the individual acts in deviation from prevailing social practices and collective expectations. Such threats to social credibility generate fear. Perceived threat activates fear, and fear, in turn, drives individuals toward avoidance of the source of threat. Under these conditions, in order to restore their social position and to move from being reproached to being socially affirmed, individuals attempt to align themselves with the dominant social logic and collective reasoning. Empirical studies likewise indicate that reproach is associated with a broad range of negative mentalhealth outcomes, particularly among individuals who have been exposed to severe or traumatic events (Wilson et al., 2022), and that it also reduces levels of perceived social support (Dohle et al., 2021).

Regulation of Fear of Reproach

That human beings are affected by reproach and praise is a natural aspect of psychological functioning. Likewise, the tendency to regulate one's behavior in response to approval and disapproval constitutes a natural and largely immutable mechanism of the human psyche. What remains subject to regulation and deliberate management, however, is the source from which reproach and praise are derived. Prioritizing one source of reproach or praise over another represents an act of human agency and free choice. Social reproach and social praise constitute one side of the same coin. The other side of this coin is divine reproach and divine approval. God likewise possesses His own modes of reproach and approval. It is the human being who must decide which source to adopt: the social source or the divine source. Within a faithoriented society, these two sources are not inherently positioned in opposition to one another. However, when they do come into conflict, it is the individual who must determine which source is to be recognized as authoritative. In situations of confrontation, one side is typically represented by a numerical majority that stands in opposition to the trajectory of faith, while the other side consists of a minority committed to sustaining a faithoriented mode of life. God likewise possesses His own modes of reproach and approval. It is the human being who must decide which source to adopt: the social source or the divine source. Within a faithoriented society, these two

sources are not inherently positioned in opposition to one another. However, when they do come into conflict, it is the individual who must determine which source is to be recognized as authoritative. In situations of confrontation, one side is typically represented by a numerical majority that stands in opposition to the trajectory of faith, while the other side consists of a minority committed to sustaining a faith-oriented mode of life. In such contexts, the majority group subjects the minority group to reproach and condemnation, thereby activating the phenomenon of social reproach. If the minority group assigns significance to this source of evaluation, fear of reproach becomes activated, which may subsequently lead to a transformation—or erosion—of faith. If, however, attention is directed toward an alternative source—namely, a transcendent source of evaluation—a form of immunity against social reproach emerges, and faith attains a state of protection and resilience. This dynamic is explicitly addressed in several verses of the Holy Qur’an. In his well-known narration to Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam concerning the nature of reason, Imam Mūsā al-Kāzīm (peace be upon him) addresses this issue in a comprehensive manner. The Imam’s analysis places God at the center of reproach and approval. He states that in the Holy Qur’an, “**God reproaches the numerical majority and praises the. 33alKulaynī, 1429 AH, vol. 1, p. 33). This indicates that divine praise and reproach must constitute the primary and authoritative standard. Once primacy is accorded to God, social reproach loses its influence, fear is transformed into social courage, and the individual no longer internalizes the negative effects of others’ condemnation. In this way, the immunity and security of faith are effectively established. Accordingly, what is required is a shift in the source of reproach and approval. The individual must be capable of transforming the locus of influence from a visible yet erroneous majority to an invisible yet truthful God. Such a transformation appears to necessitate the activation of God-oriented reason.

Covert Factor 4: Feelings of Loneliness

In Islamic narrations, believers are explicitly exhorted not to feel estranged or isolated on the path of guidance, as stated in the well-known exhortation: “*Do not experience loneliness on the path of guidance*” (Sharīf al-Raḍī, Sermon 201). One of the covert factors threatening faith is the experience of loneliness, which in Islamic literature is designated

by the term *wahshah*. (existential estrangement). Lexicographers have identified *wahshah* as the conceptual opposite of *uns* (intimacy or familiarity). It is applied to anything with which one fails to develop familiarity or a sense of belonging (alFarāhīdī, 1409 AH, vol. 3, p. 242; Ibn ‘Abbād, 1414 AH, vol. 3, p. 148). In interpersonal contexts, *wahshah* denotes loneliness accompanied by sorrow (alFayyūmī, 1414 AH, vol. 2, p. 651), or the absence of relational bonds and the estrangement of hearts from one another (alṬurayhī, 1375 SH, vol. 4, p. 157).

The term *wahshah* appears to denote a composite state consisting of loneliness and sorrow. When an individual’s sense of *uns* (intimacy and relational connectedness) with others is disrupted or severed, the person experiences distress arising from this isolation, and a condition of *wahshah* (existential loneliness) subsequently emerges.

Within existential psychology, Irvin Yalom (1981) identified four ultimate concerns—freedom, death, loneliness, and meaninglessness. He conceptualizes loneliness as a form of interpersonal isolation, referring to a state of separation or a *vortex* that arises between the individual and others. This separation emerges from failures in social skills and psychological pathology within the sphere of intimacy, resulting in a rupture in relational connectedness. Under such conditions, it appears that a portion of the self becomes isolated from the field of awareness and undergoes a form of dissociation. The aim of psychotherapy is to restore this estranged part to the individual. Excessive efforts to overcome loneliness may lead to fusion or enmeshment, which in turn destabilizes the boundaries of the *self* (Yalom & Josselson, 2014). Consequently, fear of loneliness constitutes a major motivation for seeking psychological help (Janbozorgi & Gharavi, 2015).

The Mechanism of Loneliness

The examination of the mechanism through which this factor affects faith is now in order. Based on reverse analysis within FARMAD’s method, three fundamental points emerge regarding the relationship between an individual’s faith and their social situation:

1. The psychological disposition of humans toward belonging versus loneliness: When the social environment becomes misaligned with an individual’s faith or core values, experiences of loneliness and social rejection are activated. This condition gener-

ates emotional pain and social anxiety, which psychologists conceptualize as social pain. Neuropsychological studies have demonstrated that such pain engages the limbic system and neural regions associated with physical pain, thereby eliciting powerful emotional and motivational responses aimed at escaping psychological distress (Eisenberger, 2012; Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). Under these circumstances, individuals may choose to modify their behavior or introduce flexibility into their belief system in order to reduce the anxiety and suffering resulting from social isolation.

2. Penetration into religious and value-based beliefs and behaviors: Sensitivity to loneliness and social pressure can extend beyond overt behavior and penetrate an individual's belief system and value framework. In order to alleviate the pain associated with social rejection, individuals may align their beliefs, attitudes, or even religious practices with prevailing collective norms so as to regain social acceptance and belonging. This phenomenon has been extensively examined in social psychology under the rubric of social influence on belief and behavior, demonstrating that fear of loneliness and social isolation can reshape individuals' value-laden decisions and belief structures (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Fiske, 2010; Hornsey et al., 2003). Consequently, social pressure and perceived isolation play a decisive role in the transformation of religious and value-oriented beliefs and behaviors.

Faith commitment in relation to social context may assume two distinct conditions: social accompaniment or existential solitude. At times, the prevailing social environment is congruent with faith; under such circumstances, no significant tension arises, and social accompaniment may even reinforce religious commitment. However, in other instances, the social atmosphere is incongruent with, or openly opposed to, faith and religiosity. Islamic sources emphasize that such conditions can generate fear of loneliness in certain individuals (Sharif al-Radi, Sermon 201; al-Mufid, 1404 AH, p. 137; al-Thaqafi, 1395 SH, vol. 2, p. 584; al-Nu'mani, 1422 AH, p. 27).

Under such conditions, individuals experience feelings of loneliness and social exclusion. These experiences give rise to psychological pain, including pain stemming from social stress and anxiety, as well as pain associated with the fear of loneliness itself. In an attempt to escape this distress, some individuals come to attribute the source of their

suffering to faith, and consequently seek to alleviate the pain by introducing changes into their belief system. Human beings possess an affective orientation toward companionship versus solitude; that is, they are inclined toward being with others and tend to avoid isolation. Accordingly, experiences of loneliness exert a significant influence on human behavior. When individuals perceive that a particular belief, practice, or commitment renders them socially isolated, they may alter their behavior, dispositions, or even their religious tradition in order to escape the suffering associated with loneliness. From a psychopathological perspective, experiences of loneliness and the loss of social bonds can therefore lead to transformations in an individual's religion and faith.

Encountering the Feeling of Loneliness

It is natural for human beings to experience feelings of loneliness when they find themselves in the minority. Likewise, it is also natural for individuals to engage in various actions or behavioral adjustments in order to escape loneliness. Both tendencies represent fundamental and unalterable psychological mechanisms that—according to the principle of creatorship—have been designed by God, the Almighty. In order to prevent threats to faith, the psychological pressure and pain of loneliness can be moderated through specific coping strategies. One of these strategies is the *strategy of patience (ṣabr)*. A particular form of patience is that which is exercised toward loneliness itself. Patience—defined as the capacity to endure tension and psychological pain—constitutes one of the essential constructs of human psychology. Islamic sources explicitly refer to “patience in loneliness” (*ṣabr ‘alā alwaḥdah*) as a distinct spiritual discipline (alKāfi, vol. 1, p. 36). Individuals who lack tolerance for solitude are likely to experience a rapid collapse of the fortification of faith when faced with social threat. Practicing patience in loneliness restrains the pain, and through this process, a sense of faithrelated security is maintained.

The second coping strategy is *cognitive appraisal of the situation*. In such circumstances, individuals may evaluate their condition according to two distinct patterns. The first involves a numerical or appearancebased pattern, in which being aligned with the majority and receiving social approval are perceived as positive, whereas loneliness and social rejection are viewed as negative. The second pattern, however, is substanceorient-

ed and is concerned with assessing the intrinsic nature of the situation. Within Islamic sources, two core dimensions are emphasized regarding this second model: the nature of the factor that unites the majority, and the truthversusfalsehood polarity that determines the moral substance of the collective alignment. In the first dimension, Islamic narrations emphasize that the unifying cause of a nonfaithbased majority is often the pursuit of transient worldly pleasures (*lazzāt alduḥyā alzā'ilah*), which inevitably lead to prolonged and painful consequences. Classical sources—such as *Nahj alBalāgha* (Sermon 201; *Sharīf alRaḍī*), *alMufīd* (1404 AH: p. 137), *alThaqafī* (1395 AH: vol. 2, p. 584), and *alNu'mānī* (1422 AH: p. 27)—collectively affirm this causal link between ephemeral gratification and ** enduring suffering**. Consequently, an individual who conforms to this majority for the sake of social harmony will ultimately face the painful repercussions associated with such temporal indulgence. When behavioral consequences are duly considered, the impact of loneliness becomes neutralized. In the second dimension of the substanceoriented appraisal, Islamic sources focus not on social conformity but on the truthversusfalsehood criterion. The narrations explicitly assert that if a believer remains alone and mocked (alKulaynī, *alKāfī*, 1429 AH, vol. 3, p. 619) or endures severe hunger (ibid.), he has in fact incurred no genuine loss. These teachings emphasize that the value of faith should be assessed according to moral truth, not the numerical strength or social acceptance of the majority. Hence, even in isolation and adversity, the believer retains existential gain, whereas those bonded by falsity suffer hidden loss.

The third coping strategy is based on the notion of substitute intimacy. There is no doubt that human beings possess an inherent need for intimacy and relational connectedness. When individuals experience social loneliness, they may compensate for this deprivation through alternative forms of intimacy. The need for intimacy is not confined exclusively to social relationships. According to Islamic sources, divine intimacy can function as a substitute for social intimacy (Ibn Shu'bah, p. 200). Through this substitution, the fundamental need for intimacy is fulfilled, and consequently, the security of faith is preserved. In this framework, God is presented as the most profound and reliable companion of the human being.

Interestingly, these mechanisms are rooted in reason. It appears that once Godoriented

reason is activated, all three coping strategies become accessible. In the narration concerning patience in loneliness, it was explicitly stated that this virtue originates from a powerful intellect. Cognitive appraisal likewise possesses an inherently rational nature. Another narration emphasizes the influence of reason on these mechanisms, declaring that whoever possesses God-oriented reason ('aql khudāsū) will:

1. withdraw from the seekers of worldly gain and pleasure,
2. incline toward that which belongs to God, and
3. find that God becomes his companion in fear, his associate in solitude, his wealth in poverty, and his source of honor when deprived of kin and tribe (*alKulaynī, alKāfī*, 1429 AH, vol. 1, p. 36).

Discussion and Conclusion

As discussed above, astonishment is a preconscious human emotion that arises when individuals encounter phenomena that are overwhelming, rare, unconventional, or mysterious. In contrast, Reverential awe constitutes a psychological state that emerges from the perception of vastness and grandeur. Fear of reproach refers to *the fear of being blamed, censured, or morally disapproved by others*, a condition that is accompanied by a perceived threat to an individual's social status and credibility. By contrast, the feeling of loneliness, within Islamic literature, is defined as *the suffering that results from the disruption of social bonds and experiences of social rejection*. Such experiences pose a serious threat to psychological security and may also undermine an individual's faith in relation to the object of love—namely, God. This mechanism provides a meaningful explanatory framework for understanding certain forms of psychological distress and psychopathology.

From a psychopathological perspective, the findings of the present study can be interpreted within the framework of the God-oriented spiritual psychopathology model (Janbozorgi & Ansari, 2024). Most psychological explanations of mental disorders emphasize perceptual–cognitive dysfunctions. For instance, in psychoanalytic approaches, pathology is attributed to the *ego's perception of threat*; in behavioral models, to *maladaptive learning*; in cognitive models, to *negative thoughts or cognitive distortions*; and in humanistic–existential frame-

works, to *valuerelated conflicts or the failure to adequately perceive ultimate concerns* (Janbozorgi & Gharavi, 2016). Despite their theoretical differences, these approaches ultimately converge on various forms of cognitive–perceptual impairment. In contrast, Janbozorgi’s multidimensional spiritual model (2019) proposes a multilevel explanation for psychological disorders, integrating cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions within a God-oriented framework.

Level 1: Perceptual Errors

At this level, the primary problem lies in the accurate reception and processing of sensory and spiritual data. Individuals may perceive reality in a partial or distorted manner, misinterpret transient phenomena as enduring realities, or develop attachments to impermanent objects. Such perceptual errors constitute the root of many lapses and represent the initial stage in the development of psychological disorders.

Level 2: Cognitive Processing Dysfunction

At this level, when perceptual data are not properly organized, the coordination between reason and the heart becomes disrupted. As a result, cognitive errors emerge, including distortions of reality, denial, and extremes in evaluative judgment (i.e., exaggeration or minimization). At this stage, individuals develop a distorted understanding of the self, God, others, and the world, thereby creating the conditions for psychological harm and disorder.

Level 3: Impairment in DecisionMaking and Volition

At this level, despite possessing a relative awareness of reality, individuals become overpowered during decisionmaking by emotional drives, instinctual desires, or external temptations. The inability to adequately anticipate the consequences of one’s actions, together with impulsivity, leads to faulty decisions and maladaptive or harmful behaviors.

Level 4: Disturbance in Action Management

Action is considered healthy only when it is accompanied by awareness and volitional control. However, when decisions are formed on the basis of images and incomplete or distorted perceptions, action becomes characterized by hesitation, compulsion, and devi-

ation. Illustrative examples include obsessive behaviors or procrastination, both of which arise from deficiencies in the organization and regulation of action.

Level 5: Deficit in SelfRegulation

The highest level of psychological impairment is the inability to engage in effective self-regulation. At this stage, individuals are unable to properly regulate their emotions, goals, and actions in a coherent and purposeful direction. As a consequence, initial volitional choice gradually transforms into compulsion, and life becomes marked by fragmentation and psychospiritual disorganization. Godoriented selfregulation functions as a core mechanism of mental health and inner coherence, and its deterioration constitutes a fundamental basis for many psychological disorders.

Threatening factors can be systematically explained through these five levels.

Based on the available sources, destructive influences on faith can be concisely and precisely elucidated by mapping them onto the five levels of psychological psychopathology within the Godoriented spiritual model (Janbozorgi & Ansari, 2024).

These four threatening factors—astonishment, reverential awe–based submissiveness, fear of reproach, and feelings of loneliness—each pose a subtle and covert threat to faith, and their effects can be succinctly summarized across the aforementioned five levels.

This study demonstrates that emotional and social experiences such as astonishment, reverential awe–based submissiveness, fear of reproach, and fear of loneliness can, through a shared processual pathway, undermine the security of faith as well as the functioning of reason and selfregulation in human beings. Specifically, this pathway begins at the stage of perceptual distortion, wherein individuals, under the influence of social beliefs and norms, misjudge the magnitude and consequences of phenomena and consequently select sources of influence (e.g., divine sources versus social sources) in an erroneous manner.

Subsequently, the individual enters a stage of impaired cognitive processing, in which rational analysis of consequences, accurate discernment of realities, and sound appraisal of situations are weakened. This cognitive impairment, in turn, leads to emotionally driven decisionmaking and diminished volitional control, as the individual—under the influence of social pressures, fear, or anxiety arising from loneliness—bases choices on

affective reactions rather than rational judgment. At the next stage, these emotionally driven decisions result in disturbances in action management, such that the individual's behaviors and actions increasingly reflect fear and social pressure rather than faith-oriented values. Ultimately, this psychopathological cycle culminates in a deficit in self-regulation, manifesting as an inability to regulate emotions, inhibit impulses, and maintain psychological–spiritual coherence.

International empirical research provides strong support for the validity of this mechanism. Recent studies have demonstrated that social pressure and prevailing norms can significantly alter individuals' perception and decisionmaking processes, particularly in the domain of religious and spiritual beliefs, highlighting the central role of conformism in shaping human beliefs and behavior (*Religious Fundamentalism and Conformity, Pastoral Psychology*, 2025). Likewise, findings in social psychology consistently emphasize the influence of group pressure and social norms on perception and behavior, underscoring the extent to which individuals' judgments and actions may be shaped by collective expectations rather than autonomous rational evaluation (Thiruchselvam et al., 2017).

Moreover, extensive evidence in the fields of religiosity and stress coping indicates that spirituality and religious belief can function as effective resources for emotion regulation and coping with psychological stress, thereby mitigating the negative consequences of stress and social pressure (Dolcos et al., 2021; meta-analysis on religious coping, 2004).

Research findings further demonstrate that the integration of spiritual beliefs with cognitive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal can enhance psychological resilience and modulate emotional responses in challenging situations (Dolcos et al., 2021).

Overall, these findings support a convergence between the proposed fivestage model in God-oriented spiritual therapy—namely, perceptual distortion → cognitive dysfunction → weakened volition → impaired action management → compromised self-regulation—and international scientific evidence. The key implication is that activating God-oriented reason, directing attention toward divine sources of influence, and employing effective coping strategies can facilitate the restoration of self-regulation, strengthen faith, and enhance rational functioning—strategies that, from a scientific perspective, also play a crucial role in improving emotion regulation and psychological adjustment.

Table 1 summarizes these conceptual linkages and explanatory pathways.

Level of GodOriented Spiritual Psychopathology	1. Astonishment (WonderBased Fascination)	2. Reverential Awe (Khashyah-Based Submissiveness)	3. Fear of Re-proach (Social Blame Anxiety)	4. Feelings of Loneliness (Existential Isolation / Wahshah)
Perceptual Errors	Misjudgment of magnitude and attractiveness (exaggeration of transient values)	Misjudgment of the magnitude and source of awe (underestimation of divine greatness)	Misjudgment of the influence of social reproach and trivialization of divine influence	Magnification of the threat of loneliness and erroneous appraisal of its consequences
Cognitive Processing Dysfunction	Excessive attentional focus and incomplete analysis of phenomena due to the formation of an “awehalo”	Incomplete analysis of consequences and actual influence (inability to differentiate real influence from illusory influence)	Incomplete analysis of the consequences of conforming to reproach (behavioral regulation based on fear rather than rational judgment)	Incomplete analysis of the social and personal consequences of loneliness (construing loneliness as a major threat without rational evaluation)
Impairment in DecisionMaking and Volition	Emotion-driven decision formation and suspension of rational judgment, resulting in blind conformity or blind denial	Affective conformity to the crowd or to a misidentified source of influence; decision-making under the pressure of the perceived magnitude of the masses	Emotionbased decisions governed by fear of social reputation; inability to resist reproach	Emotiondriven decisions to alter beliefs or behaviors due to emotional pressure and fear of social rejection
Disturbance in Action Management	Incongruent actions and deviation from faith (obedience to materially aweevoking matters instead of divine command)	Faithdeviant behavior and action (submission to crowd pressure)	Faithdeviant behavior and action (formation of action influenced by a misidentified source of reproach)	Performance governed by fear and social pressure rather than reason and faith (failure to appropriately employ coping strategies)

Overall, these threatinducing factors disrupt rational functioning by generating psychological pressure or excessive emotional focus, thereby replacing obedience to divine

command with obedience to created beings or collective demands. Through such indirect and covert processes, faith is gradually undermined.

Although the present study has sought to develop a specific model for identifying covert threats to spiritual cores, it is not without its inherent limitations.

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