

Humility in the Conduct of Great Scholars

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Abstract

Humility is a virtue in which a person does not consider himself superior to others, regards others as better than himself, and is content with his position. Sometimes ‘humility’ is mistaken for abjectness or meanness, a quality that is rejected in Islam. Verses in the Qur’an and hadith provide criteria for virtuous humility; these criteria distinguish humility from abjectness.

In this article, examples of virtuous humility in some contemporary great scholars’ conduct have been provided, and praiseworthy humility referred to in the Holy Qur’an and hadiths have been introduced and elaborated on.

Introduction

As said in the Qur’an, the aim of sending prophets to people is to purify and train them¹. The Prophet spoke of himself as sent down to perfect people’s morality. Thus, man’s salvation depends on his being purged of vices and enjoying virtues, and one of these virtues is humility. Humility is essential in the growth of man’s soul and his elevation to higher spiritual levels. It also guards a person against being trapped by conceit, an abyss in the development of achieving perfection.

The lives of great religious scholars indicate that Satan has always failed to inflict scientific conceit or pride on them and to deceive them by suggesting them to boast their knowledge. The lives and conduct of these renowned people set an example for those who seek knowledge and perfection. This can remind them to be humble under any circumstance, thus preventing them from falling into Satan’s trap.

The present article provides some examples of humility in the conduct of some prominent religious scholars. It is hoped that it can contribute to dissemination and propagation of humility, albeit a little,

through presenting the conduct of these role models.

General Points about Humility

The literal meaning of ‘humility’ (tawadu‘) is ‘self-effacement’ (tadhallul) and is the opposite of ‘arrogance’ (takabbur²). A humble person not only does not regard himself as superior to others, but he also considers others better than himself³. In other words, having humility refers to being content with one’s position and indeed one considers himself lower than the position. Hence, humility is different from ‘abjectness’ which is a disliked quality as mentioned in hadiths.

Given the above discussion, how is ‘humility’ different from ‘abjectness’? In the Qur’an, God refers to some characteristics of His righteous servants in which the criteria for ‘humility’ can be inferred from. God said in the chapter al-Furqan:

“And the servants of the Beneficent God are they who walk on the earth humbly, and when the ignorant address them, they say: "Peace!" And they who spend the night prostrating themselves before their Lord and standing in prayer. And they who say: O our Lord! Turn away from us the punishment of Hell, surely the punishment thereof is a grievous affliction⁴”.

In these verses, God referred to two characteristics of “the servants of the Beneficent God;” humility and fearing God. According to God, humble people a) do not walk arrogantly; and b) are not indifferent to the words of the ignorant; rather, they respond to scornful remarks of the ignorant with words void of indecency. In these verses, on the one hand, God demands lenient and humble behaviour of His righteous servants; and on the other, He wants them not to keep silent when facing illogical idle talk. Only does such wise reaction lead to humility that brings man glory.

In addition, Imam Sadiq refers to the criteria for moral humility:

Humility means you are satisfied with sitting in a lowly position in a gathering, say ‘Salam’ to everybody you encounter, do not argue with anybody even though you are right, and do not desire to find fame through your piety⁵. Considering the above discussion, avoiding self-importance is central to praiseworthy and moral humility, and based on moral principles all acts that are tainted with ostentation is rejected and considered an immoral act.

In what follows are some examples of humility in the conduct of the prominent contemporary religious scholars.

Examples of Humility in the Conduct of Great Religious Scholars

1. Grand Ayatullah Borujerdi

About Ayatullah Borujerdi, Ayatullah ‘Abdu-Sahib Langarudi said, “After his class, we used to

accompany him [Ayatullah Borujerdi] until he got onto the carriage. One day something strange happened: I suddenly saw the people surrounding him moving backward, and each person was trying to hold on to the person in front of him to prevent themselves from falling backwards. I asked someone, "What's going on?" and he replied, "Someone bent over to kiss the Ayatullah's foot, although the Ayatullah was upset with this act, and said:

'I have not achieved such a high status that I deserved to be kissed on my foot. The Infallibles' foot must be kissed, not mine! There should be a difference between the Imam and his follower and between the Infallibles and us, fallible people.'

Having said this, he returned home unhappily."

Likewise, the late religious authority, Ayatullah Fadil Lankarani, said "Whenever we went to Ayatullah Borujerdi, we used to kiss his hand, although he sometimes prevented us from doing so. We always wondered why our master sometimes prevented us from kissing his hand and other times extended it easily. Later, we learnt that when we went to him ourselves, he did not prevent us from kissing his hand, but if he summoned us for a job, he did not allow us to do so."

Ayatullah Sayyid Mustafa Khansari, a student of Ayatullah Borujerdi, also said, "Once a classmate of mine named Shaikh Ali posed a question in the class and, unconvinced with the Ayatullah's answer, he rejected it, slightly irritating Ayatullah Borujerdi. After the Maghrib and 'Isha prayers, the master's servant came and told me that I was summoned by him. I finished the 'Isha prayer and went to the Ayatullah. He told me, I shouldn't have gotten upset. I have hurt a scholar. I must first go to kiss his hand and ask him to forgive me, and then do Maghrib and 'Isha prayers.

I told him, 'He will not come return home in two hours; let me tell him that you will go to him tomorrow.' The Ayatullah accepted my idea. The next morning, when I was on my way back from the Holy Shrine of Lady Ma'sumah, I saw him waiting for me. When we entered Shaikh Ali's house, the Ayatullah wanted to kiss his hand, although Shaikh Ali prevented him. In all humbleness, the master told him, 'Please forgive me; I lost my temper and scolded you.' Shaikh Ali said in response, 'You are the chief of Muslims, I take pride in the way you treated me.' However, Ayatullah Borujerdi twice repeated 'Please forgive me⁶."

2. Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i

A long-time student of Allamah Tabataba'i wrote about his teacher's virtues. Allamah was very humble, sincere, and good-tempered. He used to teach serenely, and he would quickly familiarize himself with others and became close to them. He was also a good listener and expressed affection to all. The number of students in his courses – whether large or small did not matter to him; sometimes he taught only two or three people. He never interrupted anybody and answered questions without pretension.

In private gatherings, he was usually silent, and only spoke when asked a question. If he did not know the answer, he would clearly and assertively say, "I do not know" to overcome his despotic ego.

Whenever he was addressed as “Master” he would say, “I do not like this word. We gather here to explore Islamic teachings through cooperative thinking.”

Ayatullah Ja’far Subhani also said about Allamah, “As a person who was close to him, and I do not remember him saying anything in order to feign knowledge or proposing anything without being asked about.” Similarly, Hujjat-ul-Islam Musawi Hamadani quoted his master as saying about Allamah Tabataba’i, “I have never seen anybody as void of caprice as he was. Although he is an ocean of knowledge, he used to pray in the last line of the congregational prayer among the travelers behind Ayatullah Milani, the leader of the public prayer.”

Likewise, a scholar of the Qum seminary narrated, “Once I was praising Allamah’s Qur’anic commentary al-Mizan in his presence, and Allamah told me, ‘Do not praise me for my book because I may feel pleased and as a result lose my sincerity and intention [to gain proximity to God].’”

Finally, according to Allamah’s student, “One day I bent down to kiss his hand, but he prevented me from doing so by hiding his hand under his cloak, and he blushed while doing so. I told him, “O my master! Hasn’t Imam Ali said, ‘The one who teaches me one word has made me his servant?’ He responded, “Yes, it is a well-known hadith whose content meets of the standards of authority.” I said, “So aren’t we entitled to be blessed by your hands; you who have taught us so much and have made us your servants many times.” He smiled warmly and said, ‘We are all servants of God⁷.’”

3. Imam Khomeini

The prominent religious authority of the Shi’a world, Imam Khomeini, is a prime example of honourable humility. Despite his high status, vast knowledge, and greatness, he considered himself a religious student who only fulfilled his religious duty. He was always humble before religious scholars and authorities and never failed to express his devotion to them.

When he was in exile in Iraq, Imam Khomeini proudly and happily spoke of his accompanying the scholars of Najaf and visiting the holy shrines of the Imams there. He wrote in a telegraph:

My residence in Iraq is a great salvation in terms of both visiting the holy shrines of the Imams and being in the presence of the great religious authorities and Islamic scholars of seminaries in Najaf, Karbala, and other religious cities in Iraq. His close relative said, “When he was about to fly to Paris, his life was threatened and he was faced with an uncertain future. However, he considered facing these dangers unimportant compared to the sacrifices and martyrdom of the Iranians, saying in the Baghdad airport:

I will continue going from one country to another [until I am allowed in a country]; do not fear anything and pursue your objectives. Iranians love martyrdom very much, and I am truly embarrassed [when I think of their self-sacrifice].

Although he – as the leader of Islamic Revolution of Iran – played the main role in its victory, he

constantly emphasized the role of people in its victory. He never neglected different social classes, particularly the oppressed and the lower class, and constantly asked the officials to consider people as their masters and not denying them any service. In a letter to members of the Iranian Parliament in February of 1981 AD, he wrote: “Those people who are being killed on the frontiers, war-stricken, displaced and living in tents are servants of God. They are superior to us; why do not we care about them?”

When Imam Khomeini, who spent his entire life offering various services to Islam and achieving sublime purposes, met the self-sacrificing young people who were heading towards the front lines, in his humbleness told them, “I kiss your hands above which are the hands of God, and I take pride in this kiss.” Likewise, when he was informed of the martyrdom of a thirteen-year-old boy who sacrificed his life courageously for Islam and the Islamic revolution of Iran, he felt so humble due to this great self-sacrifice that he said, “My leader is this thirteen-year-old boy⁸.”

4. Grand Ayatullah Khu'i

As for the great humility of Ayatullah Khu'i, Ayatullah Ja'far Subhani said: Our master used to highly revere the religious scholars. I remember when Ayatullah Muhsin Hakim taught a course in a mosque after Ayatullah Khu'i's class there. Once after class, Ayatullah Khu'i was still in the instructor's place due to students' discussion and questions when Ayatullah Hakim suddenly entered the mosque. Seeing him, Ayatullah Khu'i nervously picked up his shoes and books, stood up and apologized.

On different incidents, our master used to mention the names of his brilliant students in class, praising them. Also, whenever a religious scholar gave him a valuable writing as a gift, he would write something in praise of it.

In both his youth and old age when he was the religious authority of the Shi'a world, he humbly lived the simple life of a religious student. Whenever he entered a gathering, he said “Salam” loud and clear to all those present. He was never heard saying anything negative. Among the other virtues of this impeccable man are his assistance to the destitute, peaceful treatment of his opponents, kindness to children, forgiveness, and broadmindedness⁹.

5. Ayatullah Khamenei

A relative of Ayatullah Gharawian spoke of some memories of his visit with Ayatullah Khamenei. These memories reveal the humility and tactfulness of the Iranian Leader. An excerpt of them reads as follows:

On Monday August 19th 1995 AD, in Mashhad I went to visit the Iranian Supreme Leader along with Ayatullah Gharawian. After Ayatullah Khamenei entered the room and sat down, he greeted and welcomed all people in the room – about thirty – one by one, while paying special attention to the elderly when he greeted them. There was also a frail elderly man named Shaikh Ali Akbar, who used to recite marthiya¹⁰ in Sarshur Bazaar and lived near the Supreme Leader's house. Ayatullah Khamenei devoted

great attention to him¹¹.

5. Ayatullah Jawadi Amuli

According to a student of his,

“One day we performed Dhuhr and ‘Asr public prayers led by Ayatullah Jawadi Amuli in Sa’adat Seminary. After Dhuhr prayer, I asked him if my family and I could consult with him, and he unhesitatingly set a time and respectfully told us to meet him the next morning at ten o’clock.

The next morning, we went to him at the set time. He opened the door himself and led us to the living room. It was a simple and small, but a quiet and peaceful house which was a sign of his internal purity. Ayatullah Jawadi Amuli sat at the door. Having gained his permission, I started speaking; after thanking him, I asked him, ‘What is the secret of your success?’ Having bent his head silently for some time, he answered, ‘I have not succeeded; however, the secret of others’ success was their love for God and His friends.’ He also added, ‘The more knowledgeable we are, the more grateful we should be. If we consider ourselves superior to others, we in fact amass ignorance. When our humility increases proportional to our increased knowledge, the very knowledge has manifested¹².’

6. Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi

A student of Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi, Ayatullah Gharawian, said, “One day in the course on logic taught by him, Ayatullah Misbah read a sentence from the book and said, ‘Seemingly the word يؤمن (meaning ‘believes’) should be لا يؤمن (meaning does not believe); otherwise, I cannot define the sentence.’

After the class, he went to his room, and I pondered on the sentence more carefully. It occurred to me that the sentence is meaningful with يؤمن in it. After some moments, I went to him and shared my idea. He told me that he would rethink the sentence because my interpretation of the sentence would be correct. I was impressed by his modesty and considering my interpretation possible. The next morning when he came to class, after saying ‘In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful’, he said:

Before starting the new lesson, I must say that yesterday I changed a word in the book and said that I could not define the sentence as written in it. However, one of students did me a favour and defined the sentence for me with that word. I pondered on it and found out that he was right, so today I correct myself¹³.

7. Ayatullah Hasan Zadeh Amuli

Ayatullah Hasan Zadeh Amuli is well-known for his two distinguishing characteristics: being humble and leading a simple life. In 1966 and 1967 when he taught some courses in Qum, he left his family in his hometown due to financial problems, and in a simple small room in Qum, he carried out his scholarly work. In this very room, he put the diacritics on the text of the book Usul al-Kafi and wrote many other

books. He is still humble and lives a simple life, while kindly and sincerely receiving people and listening to their concerns.

Ayatullah Salehi Mazandarani said in this regard, "I have visited many great people and leading figures. However, I have never seen anybody as humble as him, leading a simple life¹⁴."

Ayatullah Hasan Zadeh Amuli places great importance on respecting the instructors and being humble before them, pointing out in this regard:

I used to greatly venerate my masters and instructors and attempt not to lean on the wall and not to sit cross-legged in their presence. I was also careful not to repeat my words a lot. I also did not raise objections lest I might upset my instructors. Once when I was in the presence of Ayatullah Qumshe'i, I bent down to kiss his heel. He told me, 'Why have you done so?' I answered, 'I do not deserve to kiss your hand; I take pride in kissing your heel, why shouldn't I?'

8. Allamah Muhammad Taqi Ja'fari

Ayatullah Sayyid Rida Burq'e'i, a founder of the Office of Dissemination of Islamic Culture related:

After publication of some parts of the Commentary on Nahj-ul-Balaghah by Allamah Ja'fari, one day I went to the Office. A writer came in and started criticizing Allamah Ja'fari angrily, saying, 'Who is this man? What kind of commentary is this? These are absurd ideas!' Suddenly, Allamah Ja'fari came in. The belligerent writer did not recognize him, and I knew about Allamah Ja'fari's self-control, piety, and good temper.

I told Allamah Ja'fari, 'He is talking about the one who translated and commented on Nahj-ul-Balaghah.' Allamah Ja'fari listened to him patiently and carefully. He found no constructive criticism in his words; all that was said was 'absurd ideas' and 'nonsense'. Then he started laughing out of surprise. When that writer finished insulting, I turned to him, pointed to Allamah Ja'fari and told him, 'This is Mr. Ja'fari, the author of this book.' Blushed and ashamed of his behaviour, he immediately turned his face away from Allamah Ja'fari and rushed out of room without saying anything¹⁵.

Conclusion

The first step towards having virtues and purifying one's self is to know virtues and distinguish them from vices. Until one does not have the correct concept of virtues, he cannot take a step to possess them, and he may even tread a path which leads to other objectives. This is also the case with humility. Having an improper understanding of humility might make one err in acting upon it. In addition, inattention to real humility, which is rooted in modesty, may lead to pretension and mislead man. In order to identify acceptable instances of humility, it is worthwhile to refer to the conduct of prominent religious scholars and humble people.

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- [1.](#) "It is He Who has sent amongst the Unlettered a messenger from among themselves, to rehearse to them His Signs, to purify them, and to instruct them in Scripture and Wisdom," (Jum'a, 2).
- [2.](#) Turayhi, Majma'-ul-Bahrain, vol. 2, entry "wad'" (وضع)
- [3.](#) Muhammadi Gilani, Muhammad, Lessons of Islamic Ethics, p. 356.
- [4.](#) al-Furqan, 63-65.
- [5.](#) Naraqi, Muhammad Mahdi, Jami'-u-Sa'adat, vol.2, p.356.
- [6.](#) Ali Abadi, Muhammad, The Exemplary Leader, p. 178.
- [7.](#) Luqmani, Ahmad, Allamah Tabataba'i: The Scale of Knowledge. p. 54.
- [8.](#) Mukhtari, Rida, The Features of the Sages, p.285-287.
- [9.](#) A Group of Hawzah Researchers, The Flower Garden of the Righteous, pp.236-237.
- [10.](#) An elegiac poem to commemorate the martyrdom or suffering of the Shi'a Imams
- [11.](#) Muhsin Gharawian, In the Presence of the Great People, p. 179.
- [12.](#) ibid, p.30.
- [13.](#) ibid, p. 121.
- [14.](#) The Flower Garden of the Righteous, vol.3, p. 535.
- [15.](#) ibid, p.520.

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