

Hypocrisy and its Levels

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Abstract

A two-faced person whose non-verbal or verbal behaviour contradicts his inner beliefs is deemed a hypocrite. Since hypocrisy is linked to the psychological and mental state, it is mostly dealt with in Islamic ethical discussions as a trait equivalent to insincerity. Hypocrisy as stated and indicated in the Qur'an largely refers to either hypocrisy in one's beliefs or hypocrisy in politics, both resulting from intentional disbelief (*kufr*).

Nonetheless, hypocrites are heavily reproached in the Qur'an. Since the dawn of Islam, hypocrites, the internal enemies of Islam, held a deep rancour towards Islam and were harmful obstacles in the advancement of an Islamic society that helped everyone achieve social justice and individual growth.

This article expounds on the definition of hypocrisy, its levels, its connotation in the Qur'an and hadith, and the differences between both hypocrisy and falsehood, and hypocrisy and dissimulation (*taqiyyah*).

Most philologists consider the word hypocrisy (*nifaq*) derived from *nafiqah* because *nafiqah* implies expressing some belief and hiding another one. "Hypocrisy" means "accepting a religion in some ways and for some reasons and at the same time abandoning it in other ways."

The Qur'an uses the word "*nifaq*" to mean a two-faced person whose speech is different from what is in his heart. Hypocrisy is distinct from "falsehood" because falsehood is applied to words and refers to a mismatch between word content and reality, while hypocrisy is applied to people and refers to the disagreement between outward appearance and inner state as well as expressing what is not in one's heart.

Likewise, hypocrisy is different from "dissimulation" (*taqiyyah*) because hypocrisy refers to expressing

faith without being a believer; while dissimulation means expressing disbelief while one is a believer. Since in the first place hypocrisy is regarded as a psychological and mental phenomenon, it is mostly dealt with in Islamic ethical discussions and is considered equivalent to insincerity. Nevertheless, the Quranic verses on hypocrisy mostly refer to hypocrisy in belief and political hypocrisy which result from disbelief and indicate it.

Statement of the Problem

As mentioned in the Quran, those who are hypocritical are heavily reproached. From the very beginning, hypocrites – as internal enemies of Islam – were harmful obstacles. Also, hiding their deep rancour toward Islam, they inflicted irreparable harm on it. This blameworthy trait was not specific to that era; rather, it was a plague permanently gripping society.

Ayatullah Mutahhari said, "The more modern human life becomes, the more prone man is to becoming a hypocrite; a thousand years ago, human beings were not as one-hundredth hypocrite as today's people; and the more primitive man is, the less of a hypocrite he is. And unlike animals whom usually are not able to be hypocrites, man who has evolved more is actually more capable of insincerity¹."

Therefore, the different aspects of this trait are examined, along with its tangible reflections in society and its adverse consequences to the soul and society by determining the precise literal and technical Qur'anic meanings of this word.

The Literal and Technical Meanings of Nifaq

Determining the root of the word *nifaq*, Arab philologists referred to two issues. Some regard hypocrisy as derived from the *nafaqa* meaning "a hole in the ground as a way out to another place"; others consider it derived from the word *nafiqah* meaning a place in the mouse burrow, where the mouse digs a hole in the ground down and then up toward the surface of the earth and close enough to reach it, without puncturing the surface.²

The mouse builds its home by making holes in the ground, and it proceeds as far as going back to surface of the earth, making the surface thin, but not removing it. Whenever it is endangered in its burrow, it immediately removes the shell and runs away through it.

In fact, this animal creates two holes in the ground, a manifest hole where it enters the burrow, which Arabs call the *qasi'a*, and a hidden hole where it exits the hole, called *nafiqah*. *Nafiqah* is a place in a mouse burrow that is apparently earth, but inside it is hollow, like a hypocrite who speaks of his faith, while there is disbelief in his heart.

Considering this literal meaning, philologists define hypocrisy as "embracing a religion for some reasons and in some ways, and then abandoning that religion."³ According to them, the hypocrite embraces

Islam in some way and abandons it in some other ways, like a mouse which enters its burrow through one hole and exits it through the other.[4](#)

Likewise, the hypocrite speaks and acts contrary to what he hides in his heart.[5](#)

This philological investigation reveals that most philologists consider *nifaq* as derived from *nafiqa'* because *nafiqa'* implies expressing something while hiding something else in heart. Also, since there is a semantic similarity between *nafiqa* and *nifaq*, that is, revealing something and hiding something else, this seems to be an accurate choice.

Thus, there is relation and correlation between the literal and technical meanings of the term since *nifaq* both literally and technically is a disagreement between a person's outward appearance and inner state.

The meaning of Hypocrisy in the Quran and Hadiths

The Quran first used the word hypocrisy on the basis of its literal meaning, in the sense of the two-faced person. Before the Quran was revealed, there had been no such a term. Thus, the hypocrite – in the Quranic meaning – is the one whose speech is contrary to what is in his heart or mind. In other words, a two-faced person is called a hypocrite because he conceals his inner beliefs and manifests other things[6](#).

Hypocrisy has been used in two meanings in the Quran and hadiths:

1 – Pretending to be Muslim while being an infidel at heart, called hypocrisy in belief. And almost in all cases, the Quran has used the word "hypocrisy" in this very sense. The first verse of the Chapter The Hypocrites (al-Munafiqun) demonstrates this:

When the Hypocrites come to you, they say, We bear witness that you are indeed the Messenger of Allah.' Yes, Allah knows that you are indeed His Messenger, and Allah bears witness that the Hypocrites are indeed liars. (63: 1)

In the chapter The Women (al-Nisa), the inner state of the hypocrites is described as follows:

They but wish that you would reject Faith, as they do, and thus be on the same footing [as they are]. (4:89)

2 – Ethical hypocrisy, or a lack of adherence to religious injunctions. Regarding this, Imam Sajjad said, "Verily the hypocrite is the one who prohibits others from doing something while doing so himself, and commands others to do what he does not do...He finishes his day and has no concern but eating dinner while he was not fasting. He gets up in the morning and has no concern but sleeping while he was not awake at night."[7](#)

Imam Sadiq quoted the Prophet Muhammad as saying, "In our view, when outward humility is greater

than inner humility, there is hypocrisy."⁸ Accordingly, the religious scholar void of any good deed and an insincere person are among those with personal and ethical hypocrisy.

The difference between Hypocrisy and Falsehood

Hypocrisy refers to a contradiction between what a person says and what is in his heart. The hypocrite says something but does not believe in it himself, and the one who speaks of a school of thought in which he does not believe. Because of the contradiction between one's saying and his inner belief, this way of speaking is called hypocrisy, and the person is called a hypocrite whether the saying is true or not.

In hypocrisy, the truth of word does not matter; what counts is the disagreement between sayings and beliefs, and this hypocrisy is two-facedness. However, in falsehood,¹ the focus is on conflict between words and reality. That is, what is spoken does not conform to reality and is untruthful, whether the one who utters it pays attention to this aspect or not.

In other words, what hypocrisy and falsehood has in common is a kind of contradiction and disagreement in both, but the conflict in hypocrisy is the contrast between the outward appearance and the inner state. However, the conflict in falsehood refers to disagreement between what was spoken and the truth; that is, the word is not consistent with reality, without any evidence and reference for it.⁹

The Difference between Hypocrisy and Dissimulation

The act of the one who dissimulates (*taqiyyah*) may seem to resemble that of a hypocrite; he feigns something in which he does not believe in his heart.

Dissimulation and hypocrisy are substantially different, as they do not fall into one category at all. Moreover, it is not merely the case that these two differ in verdict (i.e., dissimulation is permissible and hypocrisy is prohibited); that is, one is haram, and the other mandatory in some cases. A hypocrite conceals his disbelief and expresses faith, whereas a person who dissimulates expresses disbelief and hides his faith. In the Quran, God said about the believer from among the Pharaoh's tribe:

Said a man of faith from Pharaoh's clan, who concealed his faith, 'Will you kill a man for saying, 'My Lord is Allah,' while he has already brought you manifest proofs from your Lord? Should he be lying, his falsehood will be to his own detriment; but if he is truthful, there shall visit you some of what he promises you. Indeed Allah does not guide someone who is a profligate, a liar. (40:28)

This verse – one of the verses on dissimulation – indicates that dissimulation is permissible, and is completely opposite to hypocrisy; and that the one who dissimulates hides disbelief and expresses faith.

Similarly, there is difference between dissimulation and hypocrisy in terms of aims and motives. The purpose of hypocrisy is to corrupt the society and to weaken the Islamic system, whereas the purpose of

dissimulation is to reform others and to save lives and the legitimate property and authority¹⁰.

Dissimulation is protecting oneself or one's family or innocent people from harm by doing or avoiding something or by doing or saying something which is not recommended or permissible under normal conditions. Shi'a scholars divide dissimulation into three types: prohibited, mandatory, and permissible. Among the permissible conditions whereby dissimulation can be practiced referred to in traditions by the Ahlul Bayt are a) saving the life of the believers and b) preserving Islamic unity

The Levels of Hypocrisy

As hypocrisy is primarily considered a psychological and mental phenomenon, it is mostly dealt with in ethical discussions in Islamic sources, thus having a morally-faceted classification. However, in the first and most reliable source, the Holy Quran, verses concerning the hypocrisy are often related to its social and political types that were prevalent in early Islam, and – as destructive forces – diverted people away from guidance and salvation throughout the Islamic history.

Considering this issue, Imam Khomeini in his book Forty Hadiths described the levels of hypocrisy and divided it into two types, the greater hypocrisy and the lesser hypocrisy.

1) The greater hypocrisy

This kind of hypocrisy is of two types itself, namely hypocrisy in belief and political hypocrisy. When a person pretends to believe in God, Prophet Muhammad, the Quran, and the Day of Judgment, while inwardly opposed to all or some of them, and acts against the Islamic principles and injunctions with the aim of overthrowing the Islamic government; expresses belief and faith in order to promote his interests and achieve comfort through great Islamic achievements and injunctions, and finally engages in espionage for the benefits of foreigners, he is plagued with a great deal of hypocrisy, hence, the greater hypocrisy.¹¹

This type is seen in several verses; some people directly embark on fighting with God and want to deal with God and the believers deceptively:

They desire to deceive Allah and those who believe, and they deceive only themselves and they do not perceive. (2:9)

Surely the hypocrites strive to deceive Allah, and He shall requite their deceit to them. (4: 142)

These two verses indicate that the hypocrites try to deceive God and believers. In fact, they give a clear example of the greater hypocrisy or the very hypocrisy in beliefs.

As for deceitfulness of hypocrites to God (i.e., their greater hypocrisy) and, in return, God's deceitfulness to them, the Quranic commentators have expressed various views.

According to al-Tabarsi in *Majma' al-Bayan*,

The hypocrites' deceitfulness to God is their expressing faith and belief by which they protect their lives and property. Likewise, God's deceitfulness to them refers to the fact that He would punish them proportionate to their deceit¹².

Fakhr Razi raised the question as to what hypocrites' deceitfulness to God means given His knowledge of all the secrets of the universe, and responded: "God mentioned His own name, but He meant Prophet Muhammad due to his high status and grandeur."¹³

The late Allamah Tabatabai wrote:

Deceitfulness (*mukhada'ah*) to God refers to deceiving the Prophet and believers. Through expressing faith, hypocrites seek to skillfully and relentlessly delude Prophet Muhammad and the Muslims¹⁴.

Ayatullah Mutahhari maintained that *mukhada'ah* (deceitfulness) is from *mufa'alah*, and one of its meanings is that they seek to delude their Lord.¹⁵

Also, Sayyid Qutb wrote:

The reason why the target of *mukhada'ah* (deceitfulness) is God is because He has taken into account the utmost connection and communication between Himself, the believers, and Prophet Muhammad, has represented their concerns and dignity as His, and has regarded their enemies as His. This threatens the Prophet's enemies and relaxes the believers. Because God is aware of their guile and deceit and protects the believers through His grace, and based on the consensus in the Quranic commentaries, deceitfulness of God refers to His punishing them for their deceit.¹⁶

Political hypocrisy emanates from hypocrisy in belief, and both are at the same level and degree. It has been explicitly condemned in the Quran:

Inform the hypocrites that there is a painful punishment for them —those who take the faithless for allies instead of the faithful. Do they seek honour with them? [If so,] indeed all honour belongs to Allah. (4: 138–139)

This verse clearly speaks of hypocrites' relationship with enemies; they seek to satisfy those who are against faith to win worldly honour. Certainly, political hypocrisy can permeate one's soul and faith so deeply that a political hypocrite stands against the best man in the world, namely Prophet Muhammad.

2) The lesser hypocrisy

The lesser or practical hypocrisy refers to a situation in which a person turns to pretentiousness to build confidence which in turn prepares the ground to fulfil his purposes.

Although a hypocrite is a wrongdoer who pretends to be knowledgeable, pious, poor, or devout, his hypocrisy is never related to the religion itself, but he merely seeks to achieve social status in public so that his interests such as high status or betrayal of others' property are served. In addition to confessing to faith in God, the resurrection, and prophethood, a hypocrite turns to praise and flattery and resorts to expressing unreal affection to advance his material and ephemeral worldly interests.[17](#)

Imam Khomeini termed the lesser hypocrisy in speech and actions; he believes that this kind level of hypocrisy is "insincerity" in the ethics, and this type is not the hypocritical quality meant in the Quran[18](#).

Through the lesser hypocrisy or insincerity, a person removes the light of faith from his heart and makes his actions vain because he prefers people's satisfaction to God's. However, due to belief in principles of the religion, such a person is not considered as a disbeliever. Such hypocrisy has been referred to as the practical one[19](#).

In the Quran, there is mention of insincerity, particularly by hypocrites:

Surely the hypocrites strive to deceive Allah, and He shall requite their deceit to them, and when they stand up to prayer they stand up sluggishly; they do it only to be seen by people and do not remember Allah save a little(4: 142).

The late Tabards, Allamah Tabatabai and Fakhr Razi believed that in order to exhibit a self-possessed and outwardly pious personality, hypocrites act insincerely, say what they do not act upon, seek to build up an artificial good reputation to deceive people, and remember God a little.[20](#) The Qur'an says about these people:

Who are unmindful of their prayers, who do [good] to be seen?(107:5-6)

O you who believe! Do not make your charity worthless by reproach and injury, like him who spends his property to be seen by men and does not believe in Allah and the Last Day. (2:264)

Describing those who do not believe in the Hereafter and God and spend their money in charity to pose as charitable, God said:

And those who spend their property [in charity] to be seen by the people and do not believe in Allah nor in the Last Day; and as for him whose associate is Satan, an evil associate is he. (4: 38)

Psychologically, such a person is considered to have a Machiavellian character, believing that the end justifies the means[21](#). The other instruction is that the most important way to control people is to say what they like.

Clearly, the first instruction considers it permissible for people to achieve their goal in any possible way, whether right or wrong, legitimate or illegitimate, and legal or illegal. The second teaches hypocrisy and opportunistic attitude to people as well. Moreover, the Machiavellian character inclines to brutality, lying,

distrust in others, and egotistical measures in social interactions²².

Thus, according to legal rulings, hypocrisy is of two types: one is the greater hypocrisy; that is, man pretends to believe in God, the angels, the Divine books, the prophets, and the Day of Resurrection while in heart he is opposed to some or all of them. This hypocrisy existed in early Islam and was denounced in the Qur'an, which considers hypocrites as disbelievers and dwellers of Hell.

The second type is the lesser or practical hypocrisy which refers to a situation in which one does something but intends something else. Of course, nowadays both types of hypocrisy exist at its peak and have taken on many faces.

According to the above discussion, most philologists contend that hypocrisy (*nifaq*) is derived from the root *nafiqa'* and literally means a two-faced person; this literal meaning is used in the Qur'an. Likewise, hypocrisy is of some levels, namely the greater hypocrisy and the lesser hypocrisy.

The greater hypocrisy refers to hypocrisy in belief, and the lesser hypocrisy is the practical one. This Satanic trait has been greatly condemned in the Quran and hadiths, both of which consider its detrimental effects irreparable.

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