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The Importance of the Refinement and Purification of the Soul

Those who have constructed [their own] religions, causing the straying and deviation of masses of peoples, have for the most part been scholars. Some of them even studied and disciplined themselves in the centers of learning¹ The head of one of the heretical sects studied in these very seminaries of ours.

However, since his learning was not accompanied by refinement and purification, since he did not advance on the path toward God, and since he did not remove the pollution from himself, he bore the fruit of ignominy. If man does not cast pollution from the core of his soul, not only will whatever studying and learning he does be of no benefit by itself, rather it will actually be harmful.

When evil enters knowledge in this center, the product will be evil, root and branch, an evil tree. However much these concepts are accumulated in a black impure heart that which covers them will be greater. In a soul which is unrefined, knowledge is a dark cover: *Al-‘ilm huwa al-hijab al-akbar* (Knowledge is the greatest cover). Therefore, the vice of a corrupt ‘*alim* is greater and more dangerous for Islam than all vices.

Knowledge is light, but in a black corrupt heart it spreads wide the skirts of darkness and blackness. A knowledge which would draw man closer to God, in a worldly soul brings him far distant from the place of the Almighty. Even the knowledge of divine unity (*tawhid*), if it is for anything other than God, it becomes a cover of darkness, for it is a preoccupation with that which is other than God.

If one memorizes and recites the Noble Qur’an in all fourteen different canonical methods of recital, if it is for anything other than God, it will not bring him anything but covering and distance from *Haqq Ta‘ala* (God). If you study, and go to some trouble, you may become an ‘*alim*, but you had better know that there is a big difference between being an ‘*alim* and being refined.

The late Shaykh, 2 our teacher, may Allah be pleased with him, said, “That which is said, ‘How easy it is to become a mullah; how difficult it is to become a man,’ is not correct. It should be said, ‘How difficult it

is to become a mullah, and it is impossible to become a man!”

The acquisition of the virtues and human nobilities and standards is a difficult and great duty which rests upon your shoulders. Do not supposed now that you are engaged in studying the religious sciences, and learning *fiqh* (jurisprudence) which is the most honorable of these sciences, that you can take it easy otherwise, and that your responsibilities and duties will take care of themselves. If you do not have a pure intention of approaching God, these sciences will be of no benefit at all.

If your studies, may Allah protect us, are not for the sake of God, and are for the sake of personal desires, the acquisition of position and the seats of authority, title and prestige, then you will accumulate nothing for yourself but harm and disaster. This terminology you are learning, if it is for anything but God, it is harm and disaster.

This terminology, as much as it increases, if it is not accompanied by refinement and fear of God [*taqwa*], then it will end in harm in this world and the next for the Muslim community. Merely knowing terminology is not effective. Even the knowledge of the divine unity [*ilm al-tawhid*] if it is not accompanied with purity of the soul, it will bring disaster. How many individuals have been *‘ulama* with knowledge of monotheism, and have perverted whole groups of people?

How many individuals have had the very same knowledge that you have, or even more knowledge, but were deviant and did not reform themselves, so that when they entered the community, they perverted many and led them astray? This dry terminology, if it is not accompanied by piety [*taqwa*] and refinement of the soul, as much as it accumulates in one’s mind it will only lead to the expansion of pride and conceit in the realm of the soul.

The unfortunate *‘alim* who is defeated by his own conceit cannot reform himself or his community, and it will result in nothing but harm to Islam and the Muslims. And after years of studying and wasting religious funding, enjoying his Islamic salary and fringe benefits, he will become an obstacle in the way of Islam and the Muslims.

Nations will be perverted by him. The result of these lessons and discussion and the time spent in the seminary will be the prevention of the introduction to the world of Islam and the truths of the Qur’an; rather, it is possible that his existence will be barrier preventing the society from coming to know Islam and spirituality.

I am not saying that you should not study, that you should not acquire knowledge, but you have to pay attention, for if you want to be a useful and effective member of society and Islam and lead a nation to awareness of Islam and to defend the fundamentals of Islam, it is necessary that the basis of jurisprudence be strengthened and that you gain mastery of the subject. If, God forbid, you fail to study, then it is forbidden for you to remain in the seminary.

You may not use the religious salary of the students of the religious sciences. Of course, the acquisition

of knowledge is necessary, although in the same way that you take pains with the problems of *fiqh* and *usul* (jurisprudence and its principles), you must make efforts in the path of self-reformation.

Every step forward which you take in the acquisition of knowledge should be matched by a step taken to beat down the desires of the soul, to strengthen one's spiritual powers, to acquire nobility of character, and to gain spirituality and piety [*taqwa*].

The learning of these sciences in reality is an introduction to the refinement of the soul and the acquisition of virtue, manners and divine knowledge. Do not spend your entire life with the introduction, so that you leave aside the conclusion. You are acquiring these sciences for the sake of a holy and high aim, knowing God and refining the self.

You should make plans to realize the results and effects of your work, and you should be serious about reaching your fundamental and basic goal. When you enter the seminary, before anything else, you should plan to reform yourselves.

While you are in the seminary, along with your studies, you should refine yourselves, so that when you leave the seminary and become the leader of a people in a city or district, they may profit from you, take advice from you, and reform themselves by means of your deeds and manners and your ethical virtues.

Try to reform and refine yourselves before you enter among the people. If now, while you are unencumbered, you do not reform yourselves, on the day when people come before you, you will not be able to reform yourselves.

Many things ruin people and keep them from studying and purifying themselves, and one of them, for some, is this very beard and turban! When the turban becomes a bit large, and the beard gets long, if one has not refined oneself, this can hinder one's studies, and restrict one. It is difficult to trample the commanding self under one's feet, and to sit at the feet of another for lessons.

Shaykh at-Tusi, 3 may Allah have mercy on him, at the age of fifty-two would go to classes, while between the ages of twenty and thirty, he wrote some of his books! His *Tahdhib* was possibly written during this period. 4 Yet at the age of fifty-two he attended the classes of the late Sayyid Murtada, 5 may Allah have mercy on him, and thereby achieved a similar status as he did.

God forbid that prior to acquiring good habits and strengthening one's spiritual powers that one's beard should turn a bit white and that his turban should get big, so that he would lose the blessings of knowledge and spirituality. So work, before your beards become white; before you gain the attention of the people, think about your state!

God forbid that before a person develops himself, that people should pay heed to him, that he should become a personality and have influence among the people, causing him to lose his soul. Before you lose hold of the reins of your self, develop and reform yourself! Adorn yourselves with good traits, and

remove your vices! Become pure in your lessons and discussions, so that you may approach God!

If one does not have good intentions, one will be kept far from the divine precincts. Beware that, after seventy years, when the book of your deeds is opened, Allah forbid that you should have been far from God Almighty for seventy years. Have you heard the story of the 'stone' which was dropped into hell? Only after seventy years was the sound of its hitting the bottom of hell heard.

According to a narration, the Prophet, may the peace and blessings of Allah be with him and his progeny, said that it was an old man who died after seventy years, and during these seventy years he was falling into hell⁶

Be careful that in the seminary, by your own labor and the sweat of your brow during fifty years, more or less, that you do not thereby reach hell! You had better think! Make plans in the field of refinement and purification of the soul, and reformation of character.

Choose a teacher of morals for yourself, and arrange sessions for advice, counsel, and admonition. You cannot become refined by yourself. If there is no place in the seminary for moral counselors and sessions of advice and exhortation, it will be doomed to annihilation.

How could it be that *fiqh* and *usul* (jurisprudence and its principles) should require teachers for lessons and discussions, and that for every science and skill a teacher is necessary, and no one becomes an expert or learned in any specific field by being cocky and disdainful, yet with regard to the spiritual and ethical sciences, which are the goal of the mission of the prophets and are among the most subtle and exact sciences, they do not require teaching and learning, and one may obtain them oneself without a teacher!

I have heard on numerous occasions that the late Shaykh Ansari, ⁷was a student of a great Sayyid⁸ who was a teacher of ethics and spirituality. The prophets of God were raised in order to train the people, to develop humanity, and to remove them from ugliness, filth, corruption, pollution, moral turpitude, and to acquaint them with virtue and good manners, "I was raised in order to complete noble virtue [*Makarim al-Akhlaq*]. ⁹

This knowledge which was considered by God Almighty to be so important that He raised the prophets for it is not considered unfashionable in the seminaries for our clergy. No one gives it the importance of which it is worthy. Due to the lack of spiritual and gnostic works in the seminaries, material and worldly problems have come so far as to penetrate the clergy [*ruhaniyyat*], and has kept many of them away from holiness and spirituality [*ruhaniyyat*].

So that they do not even know what *ruhaniyyat* means, nor what the responsibilities of a cleric are and what kind of programs they should have. Some of them merely plan to learn a few words, return to their own localities, or somewhere else, and to grab facilities and position, and to wrestle with others [for them].

Like one who said: “Let me study *Sharh al-Lum‘ah*¹⁰ and then I will know what to do with the village chief!” Do not be this way, that from the beginning you aim to win someone’s position by studying, and that you intend to be the chief of some town or village. You may achieve your selfish desires and satanic expectations, but for yourself and the Islamic community you will acquire nothing except harm and misfortune. Mu‘awiyah¹¹ was also chief for a long time, but for himself he achieved no result or benefit except curses and loathing and the chastisement of the life hereafter.

It is necessary for you to refine yourselves, so that when you become the chief of a community or a clan, you will be able to refine them, as well. In order to be able to take steps toward the reform and development of a community, your aim should be service to Islam and the Muslims. If you take steps for the sake of God, God the Almighty is the turner of the hearts.

He will turn hearts in favor of you:

“Surely for those who believe and do good deeds, the Merciful (ar-Rahman) will bring about love”
(Q 19:96).

Take some trouble on the way to God, devote yourselves; God will not leave you unpaid, if not in this world, then in the next He will reward you. If, aside from Him, you have no reward in this world, what could be better? This world is nothing. This pomp and these personalities will come to an end after a few days, like a dream passes before the eyes of man, but the other worldly reward is infinite and never ending.

1. This group includes Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (founder of the Wahhabi sect), Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i and Sayyid Kazim Rashti (founders of the Shaykhi sect), Ahmad Kasravi, and Ghulam Ahmad (founder of the Qadiyani sect).

2. Grand Ayatullah Haj Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karim Ha’iri Yazdi (1276–1355 AH), was one of the greatest of Islamic jurists and a source of imitation of the Shi‘ah in the fourteenth Islamic century. He attended the classes of masters such as Mirza-ye Bozorg Shirazi, Mirza Muhammad Taqi Shirazi, Akhund Khorasani, Sayyid Kazim Yazdi, Sayyid Muhammad Isfahani Fesharaki, in Najaf and Samarra. In the year 1340 AH/1921, at the insistence of the ‘ulama of Qum after finding a good omen in a passage from the Qur’an he took up residence in Qum and organized the Seminary of Qum. Among his works are *Durar al-Fawa’id dar Usul*, *As-Salah*, *An-Nikah*, *Ar-Rida*, *Al-Mawarith*, in all the fields of jurisprudence.

3. Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Hasan at-Tusi (385–460 AH/995–1067 CE). He is known as Shaykh at-Ta’ifah, and he was one of the most distinguished scholars of the Imami Shi‘ah. He was the head of the jurists and theologians of his time and he was also strong in literature, biography, exegesis, and hadith. His teachers were Shaykh Mufid, Sayyid Murtada, Ibn Ghada’iri, and Ibn ‘Abdun. The Shaykh is the author of two famous books of Shi’ite hadiths, *Istibsar* and *Tahdhib*, and are counted among the four (most important) books of the Imami Shi‘ah. Shaykh at-Tusi established Najaf as the center for Shi’ite learning.

4. Shaykh at-Tusi began to write the *Tahdhib*, which is a commentary on the *Mughni‘ah* of Shaykh Mufid, during the lifetime of his teacher (Shaykh Mufid, d. 413 AH/1022 CE). Shaykh at-Tusi was about twenty-six old at that time.

5. ‘Ali ibn Husayn ibn Musa, known as Sayyid Murtada, and ‘Alam al-Huda (355–436 AH/965–1044 CE), is one of the greatest scholars of Islam and Shi’ism. Most of the great scholars of the Imami Shi‘ah, including Shaykh at-Tusi, have benefited from his teaching. He wrote: *Amali*, *Adh-Dhari‘ah ila Usul ash-Shari‘ah*, *An-Nasiriat*, *Al-Intisar*, and *Ash-Shafi*.

6. Fayd Kashani, *Kalamat Maknunah*, p. 123.

7. Shaykh Murtada Ansari (1214–1281 AH/1799–1864), known as Khatam al-Fuqaha wal-Mujtahidin, was one of the descendants of Jabir ibn ‘Abdullah al-Ansari, a Companion of the Prophet, may the peace and blessings of Allah be with him and his progeny. He was a genius in the Principles of Jurisprudence [‘ilm al-usul], and he brought great developments in this field. Some of his professors were Shaykh Musa Kashif al-Ghita, Shaykh ‘Ali Kashif al-Ghita, Mulla Ahmad Naraqī, and Sayyid Muhammad Mujahid. Shaykh Ansari trained some great jurists, including Akhund Khorasani, Mirza Shirazi and Mirza Muhammad Hasan Ashtiani. His works include Fara’id al-Usul (known as Rasa’il) and Makasib, one of the most famous text books.

8. Sayyid ‘Ali ibn Sayyid Muhammad (d. 1283 AH/1866), was one of the great ascetics and mystics of his day. He received authorization (as a mujtahid) from Shaykh Ansari and Sayyid Husayn, the Friday Prayer leader of Shushtar. Sayyid ‘Ali spent some time in Shushtar as a judge and legal authority (mufti), and then moved to Najaf al-Ashraf. There he attended the classes of Shaykh Ansari in fiqh. And Shaykh Ansari also attended his classes in ethics. When Shaykh Ansari passed away, Sayyid ‘Ali was the executor of his will and he succeeded him in his professional position. The late Shaykh Sayyid ‘Ali was the professor and counselor of Akhund Mulla Husaynqulli Hamadani, who had many students who were led by him, some of the greatest of whom were Mirza Jawad Maliki Tabrizi, Sayyid Ahmad Karbala’i, Shaykh Shaykh Bihari, Sayyid ‘Ali Qadi Tabrizi, and ‘Allamah Tabataba’i.

9. Majma’ al-Bayan, under the exegesis of the fourth ayah of the Surah al-Qalam [Chapter: The Pen].

10. As a major work of Shaykh Zayn ad-Din ibn ‘Ali al-‘Amili al-Juba’i (911–966 AH), better known as ash-Shahid ath-Thani [The Second Martyr], Sharh al-Lum‘ah (likewise known as Rawdah al-Bahiyah) is the book on the foundations of canonical theology, which is actually the commentary on Al-Lum‘ah written by ash-Shahid al-Awwal [The First Martyr], Shams ad-Din Muhammad ibn Makki al-‘Amili al-Jizzini (734–786 AH). Though written four centuries ago, it continues to be studied in the Islamic seminaries today.

For biographical sketches of ash-Shahid al-Awwal and ash-Shahid ath-Thani, see Mulla Asghar ‘Ali Jaffer, Fiqh and Fuqaha (Middlesex: World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithnaasheri Muslim Communities, n.d.) chapter 2, <http://www.al-islam.org/fiqh-and-fuqaha-world-federation-of-ksimc> [1] (Pub.)

11. Mu‘awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan was the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty (40 AH/662 CE), which ruled the Muslim world after the martyrdom of the Commander of the Faithful, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and the five-month rule of the second Imam, Hasan ibn ‘Ali (‘a). As the founder of the Umayyad dynasty (Umayyad is derived from Bani ‘Umayyah, the name of the tribe to whom he belonged), Mu‘awiyah revived hereditary monarchy and aristocracy in sharp contrast and opposition to the rudimentary precepts of Islam. History is replete with innumerable instances of cruelty and oppression perpetrated in the world of Islam during the reign of the Umayyads including the murder, banishment and imprisonment of the followers of the Prophet’s Progeny [Ahl al-Bayt] (‘a) as epitomized by the tragedy in Karbala (61 AH) during the reign of Mu‘awiyah’s son and second Umayyad caliph, Yazid. (Pub.)

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