

# *Modesty (Haya) in the light of the holy verses and tradition*

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**Abstract:** *With this approach, a study of the ahadith and ayat relating to modesty was started. In the first step, the components of modesty were specified. We studied the tradition with a more targeted and clear approach and found much evidence for this assumption. In addition, we were able to obtain the differentiating factors of some other qualities.*

*U*nderstanding the opinion of the linguists and scholars of morality

will bring one close to the meaning of modesty, but it will not precisely determine its truth [meaning]. This issue reveals a different truth when investigating religious terminology. It is possible, and indeed necessary to pay attention to the opinions of the linguists and scholars of morality in order to understand religious terminology, without a doubt it is not enough. The meanings of the religious terminology must be derived from the corners of the texts that have brought them forth. Thus an appropriate way, is a precise study of religious literature, even though in the discussion and analysis of these, it is possible to is the light of the opinions of linguists and scholars of morality.

The essential question is: if modesty is preventive and deterring, what is the difference between it and other preventions and deterrents? In the description of many qualities, expressions such as ‘habs e nafs’ , ‘kaf e nafs’ or ‘zabt e nafs’ are used, which declare the meanings of deterrence. Now: what is the basic difference between modesty and other qualities? What causes us to name one deterrent ‘modesty’ and another ‘patience’ and a third as ‘fear’? Unfortunately in the majority of explanations of religious-moral terminologies, [only] the central region of them has been defined. The meaning of the central region is the principal and dominant point that is central to a quality.

Distinguishing the principal and central points of a quality, is quite appropriate and necessary, however it is not enough. Every quality, has a spectrum that, if its range is not defined, and boundaries made clear, interference will take place, and it will not be clear that, for example in the case of such and such, is it in the range of one quality or another. For this reason, knowing the boundaries of different qualities has a great importance, and at the same time, it is not a very simple thing to do<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the important and necessary things, is that the researchers and thinkers, fill the existing gap, and with specialist discussions, bring forth specific and clear descriptions for each quality, so that the difference between each

One of the obstacles that comes forth when studying issues relating to modesty is the means of differentiating this quality with the similar and opposite qualities. This is because in order to define the psychological substance of modesty it is quite important to know what causes us to call one psychological state ‘modesty’ and another ‘fear’, and a third ‘patience’, and a fourth piety . This important question, will bring the investigation to a new stage, and will open a new space for the study. For this reason, the process of the study will move from studying the definitions of linguists and scholars of morality to study ahadith (sayings of the infallibles) and ayat (verses of the Quran).

With this approach, a study of the ahadith and ayat relating to modesty was started. In the first step, the components of modesty were specified. These components were: the person who commits modesty, the person who modesty is done from, and the obscene act (the inappropriate action). Eventually this thought was formed that the presence of a respected observer is a stimulus for modesty. If it is sensed that someone exists that is observing the obscene act, modesty will be created and in the cases when the presence of someone is not sensed, the obscene act will be committed with ease. The given picture brings about the assumption that the differentiating factor in modesty is the element of ‘the presence and observation of a respected observer’. However we must pay attention to the fact that this is not the entirety of psychological differentiation of modesty, but it is expected that this can be its central point and strengthening factor. With this assumption, we studied the tradition with a more targeted and clear approach and found much evidence for this assumption, and in addition, were able to obtain the differentiating factors of some other qualities.

The presence of a respected observer. Some of the tradition about modesty are relating to those who, in the presence of people, have shame, but in private and places where no one is present, do not follow modesty.

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quality with another and the boundaries and relationships between them can be attained. If such a thing happens, one can be hopeful about the codification of the psychological and moral order stemming out from religion.

some other traditions criticize those who do not follow modesty in presence of people and other traditions brings the attention of people to the presence of the angels and invites them to modesty. Yet the third group of traditions, issue of the awareness of the infallibles (peace be upon them) to the actions of the people is referred, and it is requested that they have shame in their presence. In some other traditions, the oversight of God is referred to, and the universe is referred to as being in the presence of God and people are encouraged to have modesty from God. For example, imam zeyn al-abedeen (peace be upon him) says,

*“o ‘God! You saw us but we did not have shame.1”*

or imam Ali (peace be upon him), when he wants to prevent his army from fleeing, calls upon them to have shame from fleeing and for bringing about shame in them points out to them that they are in the presence of God<sup>2</sup>.

When it is asked from imam al-sadiq (p.b.u.h) that what are his fundamental points in life, he referred to four points, one of them was,

*“I knew God was aware upon me. Thus i had shame.2”* Similarly imam zeyn al-abedeen (p.b.u.h) says,

*“Be afraid of God the exalted, for he has power over you. And have shame from him, for he is close to you.3”* Imam al-baqir (p.b.u.h) also says,

*“Have shame from God, to the extent that he is close to you. Be afraid of him, to the extent that he has power over you.4”*

In these two noble ahadith, two of God’s attributes are referred to: one is the power of God and the other is his nearness, which is a sign of his awareness and information about the human actions. Here, power is known as a cause of fear, and God’s closeness and information, is a cause

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<sup>1</sup> Bihar al Anwar, Vol.94, P 125

<sup>2</sup> Bihar al Anwar, Vol.78, P 228

<sup>3</sup> Kashf al-Ghame, Vol.2, P 320; Bihar al-Anwar, Vol.71, P 336

<sup>4</sup> Bihar al-Anwar, Vol.109, P 153

of modesty and shame. Based upon this, the cause of bringing about fear is paying attention to the power of God, and the cause of modesty, is God's awareness and supervision. Thus, the prophet (p.b.u.h) states,

*"Have shame today for God is aware of all of your actions.1"*

The glorious Quran, when it is explaining the story of zoleykha's seclusion with Joseph explains regarding the refusal of Joseph.

*"And indeed, [zoleykha] called for him, and [Joseph also] if he had not seen his lord's proof, would have called for her.2"*

In this noble verse, the 'lord's proof', is referred to as the preventive agent against sin. Imam zeyn al-abedeen (peace be upon him), when explaining the 'lord's proof' says,

*"The wife of the aziz of egypt went towards the idol and threw a cloth on top of it. Joseph asked her, 'why have you done?' she replied 'i have shame if this idol sees us!' at this time, joseph told her, 'do you have shame from something that does not hear, see, understand, eat, nor drinks, but i should not have shame from that which has created humanity and has taught him knowledge?' this is the meaning of the utterance of God when he says, 'if he had not seen his lord's proof'.3"*

The cause of zoleykha's modesty was the presence of the idol, even though its supervision upon humanity's deeds is an invalid notion, and the cause of Joseph's shame was that God's supervising upon the deeds of mankind.

Imam al-sadiq (p.b.u.h) also refers to the supervision of the angels upon human's deeds, [saying],

*"whoever [for whom] in private the potential for sin is established and [he] knows God the most high is his protector, and he does modesty*

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<sup>1</sup> Bihar al-Anwar, Vol.19, P 333

<sup>2</sup> Yusuf, Verse 24

<sup>3</sup> Ayoon al-Akhbar ar-Reza, V.2, Page 60; Bihar al-Anwar, Vol.12, P 266

*from the guardian angels, God will forgive all of his sins, even if they are to the extent of [all of] the sins of the jinns and men.”*

from the viewpoint of imam al-sadiq (peace be upon him) the philosophy of making the angels supervisors is in essence that the people, by paying attention to their presence and supervision, refrain from committing sins.<sup>1</sup>

The whole above evidences and proofs establishes this assumption that from the perspective of the Islamic narrations, the strengthening factor and differentiating principle of modesty from other preventions, is the issue of ‘supervision’, meaning that you are in the presence and oversight of a supervisor. Usually our behavior in public is different from that in private. The different in behaviors in public and private are due to presence and lack of presence. When we are alone and do not sense the presence of controller, and do not know if any eye is looking over us, we can easily commit actions that we would not do in the presence of others. If in our isolation and privacy we are willing to commit certain actions which seem inappropriate, and suddenly we realize someone has entered [into our presence] and an observer is present, we will stop committing that action. Or if we later find out that someone was observing our actions, we become embarrassed, and the sweetness of shame comes upon our forehead. It is not necessary that the observing individual is a powerful person. It is enough to bring about modesty that they recognize us and respect us, and have a good opinion of us. All of these show that the essential agent in bringing about modesty is the “ presence” and” oversight”. Of course modesty is not comprised of only one element and possess other traits that will be brought up later, however right now the discussion is regarding the differentiating factor and strengthening point of modesty, and as you saw, the element of presence and oversight was the differentiating factor of modesty with other qualities.

Among the important points of this part of the study, which can be interesting for the investigators of this field, was that discovering this point, opened the door of another series of religious texts and made clear

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<sup>1</sup> Bihar al-Anwar, Vol.5, P 323

their relationship with the issue of modesty, an issue that before the discovery of this point could not be imagined. This series is comprised of those texts which bring forth the issue of the oversight, knowledge, and observation of God of humanity's actions without [specifically] using the term modesty. For a successful investigator, this is an important point, that one should not limit themselves to those texts that [specifically] use the desired word. Finding texts that contain the subject of this study is a great success, and this issue occurred in this study of modesty. For example before this it was not imagined that the verse, "does he not know that God sees?1" has a close relationship with the issue of modesty. However by analyzing the essence of modesty and understanding its' differentiating attributes [from other qualities], we understand that this noble verse points to modesty, without using the [specific] term. In the beginning of the prophet hood of the prophet when he was being put under the nuisance of one of the polytheists of mecca, God invited him to modesty and asked whether he does not know that God sees him? Bringing attention to the seeing of God and sensing his presence brings about modesty. In fact, more than calling forth people to fear, God calls them to modesty, and this shows the place and importance of modesty in the Islamic disciplinary order. Thus, imam al-sadiq (peace be upon him), states,

*"Know that you are in the presence of someone that sees you, even though you do not see him.2"*

Similarly, Imam Ali (peace be upon him) states, referring to the presence and oversight of God,

*"Heed the God in whose sight you are present, your reins are in his hands, and your movement is in his control. If you hide, he is aware, and if you make it obvious, he records it. For doing this, he has established a great guardian and recorder, who will not omit any good and will not record any invalid thing.3"*

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<sup>1</sup> Alaq, Verse 14

<sup>2</sup> Bihar al-Anwar, V.83, Page 10

<sup>3</sup> Nahj al-Balagheh, Sermon 183; Bihar al-Anwar, Vol.5, P 326

In this saying, both the oversight of God and the oversight of the angels are referred to. In any case, finding the unique characteristic of modesty caused us to discover and pay close attention to another part of religious texts that are related to and have a close relationship with modesty.

When referring to the opinions of the [religious] scholars, it becomes clear that some of them have touched upon the issue of oversight and its relationship to modesty. For example, the late majlesi, when explaining the hadith “the intention is more important than the action”, refers to several issues, and in the fourth issue talks about the issue of modesty.

“The mind of a person with modesty warrants the goodness of decent deeds and the ugliness of indecent deeds and remembers that exalted nurturer [god] is aware of him in all matters, and because of this he worships him.”

Here Allameh Majlesi makes it clear that what brings about modesty is the attention of God to human's deeds. Otherwise recognizing good deeds as noble, and ugly deeds as indecent is not enough to bring about modesty. In fear, patience, piety, and similar traits, an individual is also aware of the goodness of decency and ugliness of indecency, but this awareness is not the stimulating factor. If this awareness is accompanied with attention to God's power, it will create fear, and if it is accompanied with endurance, it will create patience . . . And therefore, that which separates modesty from other qualities is attention to the reality that a human is always in the view of God.

Another issue is the relationship of modesty and fear. Before this we stated that although there is a relationship between the meanings of these two terms, there are some unclear points that should be clarified. With the previous discussions, it became evident that modesty and fear are two preventers and discipliners that are independent from one another. The cause of modesty is oversight and the cause of fear is power. Therefore, fear cannot be the source of modesty. But another issue is that an individual with modesty, from a psychological perspective cannot, be

devoid of fear. No doubt, fear is a truth that is inside all humans, but the kinds of fear are different from one another. A fear caused by morality, is called 'knowfull '. It is a fear from God's power, and his punishment sins. It is possible that in an individual with modesty this fear also exists, but the type of this fear is different than the previously mention fear. The fear that exists in modesty is a fear of a loss of the reputation of the individual who is doing modesty. In essence, a person with modesty is worried about the reputation and good name he has in the presence of an observer, not fear about God and his punishment. It is defined by the linguists and scholars of morality as 'fear of the reproach of the people' .