

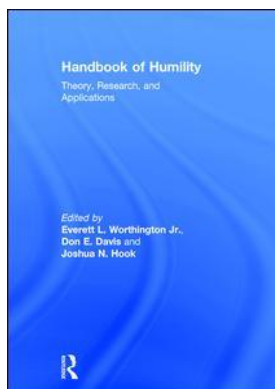
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RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON HUMILITY

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Introduction to Religious Perspectives on Humility

Perhaps one lesson of humility is that modern social-scientific investigation is at its best when it attends to premodern psychological wisdom. While philosophical and literary sources were considered in Chapters 1 and 2, this present chapter considers wisdom traditions that have been preserved and honed within the world's religions. There are at least two reasons why it is especially important to attend to the collected wisdom of the world's religions. First, humility has been a central topic of religious reflection for millennia. Second, the concept of humility appears to be particularly at home within religious frameworks. For instance, humility was not regarded as a virtue by the ancient Greeks and was, in fact, hailed as vicious by the likes of David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche, whereas within religious discourse humility has been perennially extolled. This might suggest that humility is somewhat difficult to understand without some appreciation of the religious context from which it has emerged.

Before turning to the five religious perspectives summarized in the present chapter, two caveats are in order. First, there are multiple branches of each religion presented here and even within a particular branch there is not always consensus on the nature of humility. So, each of the authors faced the nearly impossible task of briefly articulating a coherent expression of humility that faithfully represents a diverse faith tradition. Second, other important religions were not included in this analysis due to space constraints (e.g., Sikhism; see Mandair, 2013).

Brief Summaries of Humility from Five Major World Religions

Humility in Hinduism—Anantanand Rambachan

In the Bhagavadgītā (13:7), regarded as one of the scriptural pillars of the Hindu tradition, humility is the first in a list of virtues mentioned by the teacher, Krishna. Others mentioned include noninjury, forgiveness, purity, and self-control. The same text (5:18), describes learned persons (*paṇḍitāḥ*) as rich

in wisdom and humility. On two occasions, the text employs the term *nirahamkārah* (without ego) to describe the liberated person who is dear to God.

The commendation of humility implies the avoidance of its opposite, but the text is also explicit on the problems of arrogance. Arrogance (3:27) (*māna/ahamkāra*) is an expression of ignorance and delusion. In a lengthy discussion (16:10–21), arrogance is associated with greed, hypocrisy, anger, and the hurting of others and self.

Attached to insatiable desire, full of hypocrisy, arrogance and conceit, having accepted false notions through delusion, they work with unclean resolves. Clinging to immeasurable anxiety, ending only in death, with gratification of desire as their highest aim, convinced that this is all. Bound by a hundred ties of desire, intent on greed on anger, they seek to obtain, by unjust means, hoards of wealth for their pleasure.

(16:10–12)

The Bhagavadgītā's commendation of humility and its problematization of arrogance are similar to what we see in other Hindu sacred texts. Humility is the fruit of wisdom and right knowledge, while arrogance manifests ignorance and false knowledge. Humility, in the Hindu tradition, is rooted theologically in a proper understanding of the relationship between God and the world. It is to this relationship that we now turn.

The Upaniṣads, or the wisdom section of the authoritative Hindu scriptures (the Vedas), offer many suggestive analogies to describe the emergence of the universe from *brahman*, the infinite (hereafter, I translate *brahman* as God but this does not imply that I equate *brahman* with all attributes of God in monotheistic traditions). Among the most well known of these are the analogies from the Chandogya Upaniṣad (ch. 6):

Just as through one lump of clay everything made of clay is known, so difference of shape is just name, dependent on speech: "clay" is the reality.

Just as through one copper ornament everything made of copper is known, so difference of shape is just name, dependent on speech: "copper" is the reality.

Śaṅkara (c. 8th CE), the most famous of Upaniṣad commentators, interprets such texts to teach that *brahman* is both the intelligent cause of the universe and its material ground. The Hindu tradition does not employ the language of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing) to speak of the emergence of the world from God. At the same time, the tradition does not equate God with the world

(i.e., pantheism). God is immanent in the world as its ground and ontological truth, while also transcending it. Transcendence, however, is not understood in spatial terms.

The relationship between God, living beings, and the world is never imagined on the model of the watch and watchmaker (i.e., after its creation, the watch exists and functions independently from the watchmaker). The analogy of the clay and clay pot suggests that in every moment the universe is dependent on God for its very existence and functioning. To make this point, Kena Upaniṣad (ch.1) describes God as the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, the Speech of speech, the Breath of the breath, and the Eye of the eye. No organ, physical or mental, functions in the absence of God, the reality indwelling everything.

While our achievements in life depend on the use of our bodies and minds, we do not create these; their source is in God. All human achievements are ultimately dependent on God, the source and sustainer of body and mind. This is not exaggerated praise; it is truth arising from our understanding of God's nature and relationship with the world. Human arrogance is as untrue as a clay pot claiming independent reality from clay.

In the Hindu tradition, however, humility is not the same as self-deprecation. The Bhagavadgītā (6:5) warns against self-degradation and commends friendship with self. It is not wrong to take pride in one's achievements. We exercise freedom and initiative in developing our gifts; humility and gratitude follow from the understanding that God is the source of these gifts.

The truth of humility is rooted also in the recognition of our dependence on the universe and on a complex network of interrelated beings for our existence and flourishing. The Hindu tradition speaks of the human being as living in a condition of indebtedness. Although three of these are emphasized (God, teachers, and ancestors), the list includes the world of nature and human beings. Acknowledging the truth of our constant indebtedness to others, known and unknown, we grow in humility and overcome our disposition to false independence and arrogance. In the Bhagavadgītā (3:12) the person who lacks the understanding of his indebtedness is represented as behaving in the world like a thief—taking greedily from the universe without giving back. In fact, the prosperity of the universe is dependent on mutual giving that is founded in a deep understanding of being a receiver of the gifts of others.

The spiritual benefits of humility (*vinaya*), in the Hindu tradition, are better appreciated in the light of the problems of its opposite, arrogance (*māna*). First, arrogance is rooted in untruth about ultimate and social reality. It does not reflect knowledge of *brahman* as the intelligent cause and material ground of the universe as well as our indebtedness to others. Second, arrogance blinds

us to our limitations and is, therefore, not conducive to spiritual and ethical growth. Humility is equated with knowledge since it is the condition for learning. Third, arrogance causes an increase in interpersonal and social friction. It results in the tendency to underestimate and even demean others in the attempt to assert one's own superiority. Such attitudes are not conducive to building relationships of love and trust. Finally, arrogance increases personal anxiety because of the preoccupation with how one is seen by others. It perpetuates the feeling that one's qualities are never fully recognized by others. Besides being impatient when recognition is not accorded, arrogance enhances one's susceptibility to flattery and manipulation by those who are willing to indulge the ego for their own selfish ends.

In the Hindu tradition, humility is the fruit of understanding the nature of ultimate reality (*paramārtha*) as well our interrelated social reality (*vyavahāra*). Since it is grounded in an honest appraisal of our abilities, it leaves room for personal growth and development. Humility is not threatened by the achievements of others and enables us to be generous in relationships. It promotes deeper human relationships founded on understanding and respect. Humility is associated with peace (*śānti*). A humble person is free from the anxiety for praise born out of an exaggerated sense of self-importance and free from the hurts that follow the persistent demands for recognition from others. Humility promotes generous self-giving and is prosperity. As a virtue, humility expresses wisdom while also being the way to wisdom.

Humility in Buddhism—Abraham Vélez de Cea

Defining humility from a Buddhist perspective is not an easy task, both because there are many different Buddhist schools, and because humility is a Western concept that has not always been understood in the same way by Western secular and religious traditions. Here I limit myself to reconstructing a Buddhist concept of humility based on the Buddha's teachings in the *Pāli Nikāyas*, the earliest Buddhist texts available. In short, I understand Buddhist humility as the absence of "*māna*" or "conceit."

Conceit is one of the ten fetters (*saṃyojana*) that prevents beings from attaining the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teachings (i.e., liberation from suffering). More specifically, conceit is one of the five higher fetters, and it disappears only at the highest level of holiness and spiritual development (*arahantship*). Thus, the cultivation of humility (i.e., the gradual removal of conceit) is indispensable to progress in the spiritual path and eventually attaining liberation. Buddhist liberation, however, requires not only the removal of conceit, but also the removal of craving and other fetters. For instance, M.I.12; M.I.122; A.III.444 describe the liberated being thus: "He has cut off craving, removed the fetters,

and with the complete comprehension of conceit (*sammā mānābhisamayā*) he has made an end of suffering.”

The importance of humility cannot be underestimated. Conceit hinders our ability to properly treat people worthy of respect, veneration, and reverence. For instance, at S.I. 177–178 the Buddha explains to whom people should avoid conceit:

First one’s own mother and father, then one’s eldest family brother, then one’s teacher as the fourth: Towards these one should avoid conceit; Towards these one should be reverential; These should be well respected; These it is good to venerate deeply . . . Having struck down conceit, humble, one should pay homage to the worthy ones.

This teaching allows us to infer that without humility people fail to respect parents, elders, teachers, and holy people. So Buddhist humility helps us appreciate the value of certain roles within society as well as the wisdom and the virtues of certain kinds of people.

Conceit is often associated with arrogance (*atimāna*). Both are considered evil (*pāpaka*) qualities (M.I.15) that defile the mind (*cittassa upakkilesa*) (M.I.36). The Buddha teaches that someone who is not arrogant

pays homage to one who should receive homage, rises up for one in whose presence he should rise up, offers a seat to one who deserves a seat, makes way for one for whom he should make way, and honors, respects, reveres, and venerates one who should be honored, respected, revered, and venerated,

(M.III.205)

Thus, Buddhist humility can be said to foster appropriate conduct toward all those who deserve to be honored and venerated, not just toward parents, elders, teachers, and holy people as S.I. 177–178 seems to suggest.

Conceit presupposes an inaccurate assessment of one’s abilities and accomplishments. For instance, at M.II.252 the Buddha speaks about the excessive conceit or overestimation (*adhimāna*) of some disciples who declare to have attained final knowledge without having actually attained such knowledge. In fact, the fourth *pārājika* or transgression entailing expulsion from the community of monks and nuns is to falsely claim that one has attained liberation or any spiritual state. Thus, Buddhist humility not only has to do with appropriate conduct toward people worthy of respect and honor, but also accurate knowledge of one’s limitations.

Conceit also presupposes an inaccurate understanding of one's nature. The subtlest form is egocentric conceit, that is, "*asmimāna*," which means "the conceit 'I am.'" On egocentric conceit people measure up against each other, giving rise to three main subtypes: (1) the conceit "I am better" (*seyyo 'ham asmimāna*), which entails a sense of superiority; (2) the conceit "I am equal" (*sadiso 'ham asmimāna*), which entails a sense of competitiveness or complacency; and (3) the conceit "I am worse" (*hīno 'ham asmimāna*), which derives from a sense of inferiority. For the Buddha, these three kinds of egocentric conceit must be abandoned (S.V.56).

The main problem with egocentric conceits is that they seem to assume the existence of a permanent, unchangeable, and unconditioned self underlying one's identity, which for the Buddha is always fluid, impermanent, and dependently originated, thus subject to change and not to be fixated in absolute terms as being better, equal, or worse than anything or anybody. Another problem with egocentric conceit is that it leads to negative consequences. For instance, at S.I.11–12 the Buddha states that the liberated being does not think "I am equal, better, or worse," which may lead to engaging in disputes (cf. Sn.842).

Buddhist humility is closely related to the Buddhist doctrine of non-self. For the Buddha, doctrines that assume the absolute existence of a permanent, unchangeable, and unconditioned s/Self lead to disputes and provide a foundation for self-centered, selfish, and conceited attitudes. In contrast, the Buddhist doctrine of non-self is intended to avoid disputes and facilitate the removal of self-centered attitudes, literally "I-making activity" (*ahankāra*), selfish attitudes, literally "mine-making activity" (*mamankāra*), and egocentric conceit (i.e., "the conceit 'I am'"). The profound link between the doctrine of non-self and the most advanced forms of Buddhist humility can be inferred from A.IV.353, where the Buddha states that "[o]ne who perceives non-self eradicates the conceit 'I am,' [which is] *nibbāna* in this very life." However, first it is necessary to abandon clinging to doctrines about a self or views on personality (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), and only afterward the complete removal of the conceit 'I am' takes place (S.III.128–131).

In order to develop the most advanced forms of humility the Buddha recommends different types of meditation. For instance, at M.I.424–5, the Buddha advises Rāhula to develop meditation on the perception of impermanence. At M.III.19, the Buddha recommends to know and see the five aggregates, that is, the five basic constituents of all beings, as "this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself" (*netam mama, nesohamasmi, na meso attā'ti*). At M.III.115, the Buddha also recommends contemplation of the rising and falling of the five aggregates. However, meditation alone does not seem to be sufficient to eradicate the subtlest forms of conceit. In fact, at S.V.56 the Buddha teaches that the Noble Eightfold Path is "to be developed for direct knowledge of the three kinds of

conceit, for their full understanding (*abhiññā*), for their utter destruction, for their abandoning.”

Humility in Judaism—Dani Rabinowitz

On the surface Judaism appears to be a religion focused on law. Much of daily life is governed by an extensive array of legal obligations. Given the preponderance of attention devoted to legal minutia, one may be excused for thinking that in Judaism matters pertaining to human nature play second fiddle to legalities. A closer look, however, reveals a religion deeply committed to the development of the moral virtues.

The biblical Moses casts a long shadow. Apart from being the divinely elected recipient of the Torah and orchestrating the exodus, Moses is also a person whose character is revered. Of all his character traits that could have been recorded for posterity, the Torah chose to accentuate his humility. “Moses was very humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3). It is not surprising, therefore, that we find the prophetic works and rabbinic literature replete with praise for humility and exhortations to achieve it (Adler, 1992; Green, 1973; Kohler & Schreiber, 1906). In a telling Talmudic anecdote, Rabbi Joshua learns from Isaiah 61:1, “The spirit of the Lord God was upon me, since the Lord anointed me to bring tidings to the humble,” that the highest or most important moral virtue is that of humility.

Despite the serious light in which classical Judaism takes humility, it is somewhat of a curiosity to learn that few Jewish sources have devoted much time to explicating the concept itself. Perhaps the concept was seen as so obvious by extension that such conceptual analyses were deemed redundant. An intuitive understanding carried the day. However, in a distinct departure from the norm, it is in the hands of Moses Maimonides that the centrality and significance of humility reached the highest cadence in rabbinic literature. Channeling Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Alfrabi’s *Aphorisms of the Statesman*, Maimonides crafts a virtue ethics into the fabric of Jewish law itself wherein a moral virtue is defined as the midway between two excess points (Davidson, 2005). Importantly, Maimonides’s legal motivation for this inclusion is the positive commandment to emulate God (Deut. 22:9), who is described as exhibiting such character traits. By way of example, Maimonides mentions prodigality and tightfistedness. Neither character trait is virtuous. Rather, one should develop a trait that lies at the midpoint between these two extremes. This is Maimonides’s version of Aristotle’s golden mean. Maimonides (1998) makes two exceptions to this scheme—anger and arrogance:

There are temperaments with regard to which a man is forbidden to follow the middle path . . . Among these is arrogance. If a man is only humble, he is

not following a good path. Rather, he must hold himself lowly and his spirit very unassuming. That is why Numbers 12:3 describes our teacher Moses as “very humble” and not simply “humble.” Therefore, our Sages (T.B. Sotah 5a-b) directed: “Hold oneself very, very lowly.” Also, they declared: “Whoever is arrogant is as if he denied God’s presence,” as implied by Deuteronomy 8:14: “And your heart will be haughty and you will forget God, your Lord.” Furthermore, they said: “Whoever is arrogant should be placed under a ban of ostracism. This applies even if he is only somewhat arrogant.”

(2.3)

There is no tolerance for those failing to develop a robust sense of humility. With Moses as the exemplar, the bar is set very high indeed. Maimonides (1998) writes that those who have character traits at one end of the spectrum should “move in the direction of the opposite extreme, and accustom himself to that for a long time, until he has returned to the proper path, which is the midpoint for each and every temperament.” Insofar as humility is concerned, one

who is full of pride should cause himself to experience much disgrace . . . sit in the lowliest of places, dress in tattered rags which shame the wearer, and the like, until the arrogance is uprooted from the heart.

(2.2)

While Maimonides’s account is not sufficiently robust insofar as conceptual analysis is concerned, it nevertheless draws the reader’s attention to the range of self-reflective mental states wrapped up in humility. Intuitively, humility would seem to require a sense of self-nullification or self-effacement wherein one considers oneself worthless. This couldn’t be further from the Jewish perspective on humility, as demonstrated by Bachya Ibn Paquda (1996) and Abraham Isaac Kook (1971). Both consider humility to involve a robust sense of self-esteem, a pride in one’s spiritual achievements and qualities. This healthy pride acts as a motivator, leading one to acknowledge that given one’s potential and worth, there is still much to be done and achieved:

This pride does no harm to humility and does not keep it distant.

(Bachya Ibn Paquda, 1996, p. 163)

At times we should not be afraid of the feeling of greatness, which elevates man to do great things [as] all humility is based on such a holy feeling of greatness.

(Kook, 1971, p. 141)

At the root of arrogance lies a lack of self-esteem; the arrogant person seeks to assuage his sense of worthlessness by bringing others down and seeking out their praise. He considers his achievements exemplary given his limitations. In contradistinction, the humble person recognizes that she could achieve so much more given her talents and worth. A person who thought himself a “nobody” could neither provoke before the ruler of Egypt nor stand before God on behalf of a nation. Only someone confident in his talents, secure in his skin, and robust in his convictions could achieve these historical and spiritual highs. It was Moses’s humility that underpinned his greatness.

When humility is viewed in this light, it is not surprising that Judaism is a religion predicated upon spiritual obligations because Judaism considers human beings capable of spiritual heights and demands it of them. Humility is the key to achieving these heights.

Humility in Christianity—Stephen Pardue

Jewish thinking on humility served as the starting point for early Christians. Along with the Hebrew Bible, early Christian writers assert that humility is rooted in humanity’s limited knowledge about and place within the universe (see, e.g., Ps. 8 as cited in Heb. 2), as well as human brevity in the grand scheme of history (see, e.g., Isa. 40:8 as cited in Jas. 1:9–11).

However, Christian humility quickly adopted its own shape as early Christians reflected upon the life and teaching of Jesus. In the Gospel narratives, Jesus often highlights children for their diminutive stature and low social status and states that “whoever humbles himself” like a child “is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:4, ESV). He likewise calls on his disciples to be servants to all if they desire greatness in the kingdom of God (Matt. 23:11; Mk. 9:35, 10:44), and on the night before his crucifixion he washes his disciples’ feet, subverting social norms and explicitly calling his followers to similar acts of humble service (Jn. 13:1–20).

These socially oriented applications of humility were countercultural and gave rise to a distinctively Christian understanding of the virtue. Most poignantly, from the earliest stages, Christians have regarded Jesus’s death on the cross not only as an act of uncommon love, but of humble self-giving that is worthy of emulating in analogical ways. In what is widely regarded as one of the earliest Christian hymns, the apostle Paul exhorts Philippian Christians to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3) and cites the incarnation and death of Jesus as an exemplary instantiation of humility.

Although the import of humility cuts across all Christian traditions, individual thinkers differ when it comes to defining humility. For example, whereas

Aquinas (ST II-II, 161) describes humility as a limit on our aspirations, so that we do not aim for things beyond our capacities, Bernard of Clairvaux (1974) describes it as true self-knowledge, which inevitably results in submission to God. In the monastic tradition, humility is tied closely to self-sacrifice and humble obedience to authority, and these practices are grounded in Christ's own humility (Burton-Christie, 1993). In spite of differences in emphasis, however, most Christian accounts of humility suggest that it includes (1) an opposition to pride or vanity, (2) a suitable response to creaturely limitations and flaws, and (3) a willing submission of the self to God.

Although scores of Christian thinkers have reflected upon humility's significance for the spiritual life, Augustine of Hippo has perhaps been the most influential. In Augustine's thought, Jesus's humility is the controlling principle of both metaphysics and ethics. Metaphysically, it is the Son of God's humble willingness to embrace incarnation and crucifixion that allows humans to return to the fellowship with God that they lost in Eden (Ruddy, 2001). In the realm of ethics, Augustine highlights humility as the hallmark of Christian conversion. He notes that even upstanding and admirable pagan teachers lack this virtue, and that this is what keeps them from completing their quest for moral and intellectual wholeness (Dunnington, 2016). The reason that humility is so significant for those following Jesus is that it is the virtue that most directly combats pride (*superbia*), humanity's most endemic spiritual disorder.

Christian tradition regards humility toward God and others as ultimately beneficial to the practitioner. Proverbs 3:34, which espouses the general principle that God "opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble," is explicitly cited multiple times in the New Testament (Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5), not least in the *magnificat* of Mary after she receives the news of Jesus's conception: "he has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate" (Lk. 1:52). Moreover, the Gospels often highlight the continuity between Jesus and the Hebrew Bible's long line of key characters who were consistently regarded by society as inadequate for their grand callings. Thus, just as David was least likely among his brothers to be selected as king (1 Sam. 16:1–13), so also Jesus of Nazareth is regarded as an unlikely candidate to fulfill messianic expectations (Mk. 6:1–3, Jn. 1:46). And the general theme of the humble triumphing over the proud is emphasized repeatedly throughout the New Testament (Lk. 14:11, 18:14; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:16; Jas. 1:10). Christians thus regard humility as having not only spiritual benefits—disentangling the soul from the clutches of pride and renewing in them the image of God—but also practical ones. The humble are more likely to enjoy divine blessing and are more likely to be on the right side of history in the long run.

There is strong evidence that from the earliest days of Christian monasticism, humility was regarded as a crucial goal, and even an organizing principle for monastic life. An early collection of sayings from Egyptian monks, for example, demonstrates not only a close association between asceticism and humility—the practices of self-deprivation and silence were designed to keep one mindful of one’s shortcomings and to simulate an imitation of Jesus’s self-giving life and death—but also an awareness that “going through the monastic motions” was not sufficient to produce humility (Burton-Christie, 1993, p. 237).

Such warnings against simply imitating an external rule are common throughout the tradition, but this did not stop Christian thinkers from seeking to reflect on the cultivation of humility in a systematic way. The most influential treatment of humility’s cultivation is Benedict of Nursia’s description in his influential *Rule* for monastic life. He outlines twelve steps toward acquiring humility, which include the submission of one’s will to divine commands, regular confession of one’s shortcomings to a trusted elder, a grateful acceptance of one’s work assignments and food allotments, and the strategic use of silence geared toward cultivating solemnity. Today, many of these practices persist in Christian communities, even if in less extreme forms than in Benedictine monasticism (Pardue, 2012).

Humility in Islam—Sherman Jackson

Humility is a central virtue in Islam, a *sine qua non* of the religion. It is less a formal religious doctrine, however, than it is an ethos that suffuses Muslim religious consciousness, sensibilities, and imagination. Several words and phrases in the Qur’ān underscore the value of humility: *The servants of the All-Merciful are those who walk upon the earth in humility (hawn^{an}), and when the impudent address them they say, ‘Peace’ [25:63]; If only, when Our salutary afflictions came upon them, the people had humbled themselves (taḍarraʿū) [6:43]; Has the time not come for the hearts of the Believers to be humbled (takhsha‘) by the remembrance of God? [57:16]. In the Qur’ān, Prophetic literature, and Muslim tradition, however, the full scope and significance of humility are conveyed disjunctively as the antithesis of arrogance.*

Arrogance, the Qur’ān intimates, is humanity’s deadliest flaw. The very first verses revealed to Muḥammad speak of humans’ propensity to “transgress all bounds,” based on delusions of self-sufficiency (*istighnā*) [96:6]. Arrogance (*istikbār*) is also the source of Satan’s insubordination [2:34], Pharaoh’s blasphemous megalomania [28:39], and whole peoples’ rejection of their prophets [45:31]. The Qur’ān proclaims, *God does not love those who are arrogant, full of conceit* [4: 36]. Indeed, so toxic is the disease of arrogance that a Prophetic hadith warns: “No one in whose heart resides a mustard seed of arrogance shall enter Paradise” (*Muslim*, 1415/1995, p. 1:89).

The value and virtue of humility are firmly grounded in Islam's monotheism. The third/ninth-century sage, al-Hārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) explains: "Self-aggrandizement is the preserve of God alone, being improper and unacceptable for anyone else; for everyone besides God is a contingent belonging, while God is the All-Powerful, Divine Owner" (al-Muḥāsibī, N.d. 373). Humility flows, thus, from humans' recognition of their status as created, contingent entities, with all that this implies in the way of debt and duty to the Creator. This, in fact, is the ground of the very act of *islām* itself, literally "humble submission." Al-Muḥāsibī insists that humans can only question this debt and duty to God via a willful disregard for the bounties that God bestows. Such heedlessness underwrites a sense of unaccountable autonomy and, when stoked by the natural desire for status and validation, breeds haughtiness and contempt for the truth and for people. Humility is the antidote to all of this.

Even religious people, however, who acknowledge their debt and duty to God, may lack humility. In fact, religion may actually land in the employ of this psycho-spiritual deficit. Al-Muḥāsibī speaks thus of religious scholars who privately disdain the laity, "even though the latter are (often) more God-fearing" (al-Muḥāsibī, 383). And he censures those who argue merely for the sake of reputation, refusing to acknowledge the truth if it appears on the tongue of an adversary. Arrogance and a lack of humility even prevent some scholars "from seeing anyone other than themselves as being capable of speaking truth about God," imagining that "no one else on earth is guided except them" (al-Muḥāsibī, 389).

Of course, humility is not a challenge for the learned, powerful, or well-to-do only. As the celebrated Ibn "Aṭā" Allāh al-Sakandarī (d. 709/1309) admonishes:

Do not think that arrogance only resides in people of power or wealth. On the contrary, it may reside in one who does not have enough food for a single night. Yet, he spreads corruption instead of good, due to his arrogance towards God's creatures.

(Jackson, 2012, p. 61)

Indeed, the Prophet placed the "arrogant poor" (*'ā'il mustakbir*) among the most contemptible in the sight of God (*Muslim*, 1:97).

Beyond its religious and social functions, Muslim tradition holds humility to be key to enhancing human powers of perception and understanding. Al-Muḥāsibī insists that God is not apt to grant those who lack humility true knowledge, understanding, or insight. He cites the verse, "I will turn away from My signs those who unjustifiably proceed with arrogance in the land" [7:146], noting that the exegetes explained this to mean that God will "lift the Qur'ān

from their hearts” and “veil their hearts from the secrets of the spiritual world” (al-Muḥāsibī, 376).

As for acquiring, sustaining, and enhancing humility, the famed al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) cites a two-pronged approach. The first seeks to excise arrogance from the heart, beginning with monotheism (*taḥḥīd*), recognizing God’s grandeur and the truth about humans’ nature, provenance, and ultimate end. This, he insists, leaves no justifiable attitude other than humility. The second prong aims at preventing outside forces from corrupting one’s sense of humility. This is achieved by following the example of the Prophet—the exemplar of humility par excellence—alongside the legacy of the righteous ancestors of old (al-Ghazālī, N.d., 3:348–58).

Humility is not the same as self-abnegation. In the aforementioned hadith (para. 2) that warns of the eschatological consequences of arrogance, a man responds by asking, “O Messenger of God, what of a man who loves that his shoes and clothing be fine?” The Prophet replied, “God is beautiful and loves beauty. Arrogance is disregard for the truth and contempt for the people” (*Muslim*, 1: 89). Humility is simply the opposite.

Discussion—Steven L. Porter

From the foregoing review, it is clear that each of these religions possess rich treatments of the nature of humility that deserve further investigation. Moreover, there appear to be at least four insights that have import for contemporary research on humility. First, humility is universally recognized and appreciated among the major world religions, while its opposite is decried. Although this widespread endorsement of humility among religions has been noted before (e.g., Woodruff, Van Tongeren, McElroy, Davis, & Hook, 2013), the perspectives gathered here make it clear that each religion has its own independent reasons to regard humility as a crucially important character trait. The lesson here is that continued research on humility is called for because humility clearly stands out as one of the most universally appreciated positive traits. Second, according to these world religions there is a centrality and necessity to humility in human life. Humility is not tangential or optional, but is the fitting posture of human persons, fundamental to one’s orientation to the world, and foundational to human flourishing. The insight here is that these world religions predict that humility will be meaningfully related to other virtues and negatively related to vice. Third, these religions agree that humility does not involve an undue negative assessment of self, but rather an accurate view of self. So, while religious humility stands against self-exaltation, it does not involve self-deprecation. This brings us to the fourth lesson. From the religious perspective, the virtue of humility is necessarily grounded in a transcendent reality: something that stands outside of and gives ultimate meaning to the universe to which

one owes deference. The religious transcendent not only puts human selves in perspective, but for each religion transcendent reality is the on-going source of existence such that humility requires an on-going response of dependence and submission. There is, then, a real question from the religious perspective whether humility can be fully appreciated and fostered outside of a religious context. This is not to say that religious persons will be more humble than non-religious persons or that nonreligious persons cannot be humble (see Wielenberg, 2005), but rather that the concept of humility is most coherently located within a religiously transcendent view of the world (see Bollinger & Hill, 2012).

These five religious perspectives on humility also point toward several insights that have import for contemporary practice of humility within and across the religious perspectives. First, each religion sees an absence of self-aggrandizement, self-importance, and ego-centeredness as a proper part of humility such that we might expect religious communities to be exemplars in manifesting a humble way of life (e.g., respectful, interreligious dialogue). But a complication here is that a religion's practice of humility toward others (horizontal humility) will be modulated by humility to its religious authorities (vertical humility). Those religious authorities, whether sacred texts and/or God, might be understood to dictate a posture toward certain others (e.g., those outside one's faith) that limits the application of humility in that case. In other words, a lack of humility within a religious community is not always hypocritical if the stance is rooted in some other religious principle that recommends a posture other than humility. How this possible tension could be resolved would need to be investigated within the framework of each religion. Second, for each religion humility is a trait that comes in varying degrees and is susceptible to development. Distinct formative practices are put forward by each religion (e.g., the Eightfold Path) that serve to accurately position one's self in the universe such that one develops greater humility. Lastly, when it comes to humility within these religious contexts there is an apparent push and pull. Due to one's relationship to religious transcendence (God, *brahman*, etc.) there is a ground for humility (e.g., you are creature, not Creator) as well as an opportunity for healthy pride (e.g., you are specially related to the Creator). Perhaps this is precisely the balanced beauty of humility in religious contexts: there is a mechanism that simultaneously deflates (the pull) as well as inflates (the push) the self such that we end up with an accurate view of self that is neither self-aggrandizing nor self-deprecating.

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