

A Drop in the Sea: The Life and Character of Mirza al-Shirazi

How do we live a life of both knowledge and piety, of critical investigation and a profound faith in the Unseen? Traditionally, Muslims would listen to and share anecdotes from the lives of their eminent scholars, to draw inspiration on how to combine the seemingly conflicting virtues of scholarship and devotion. In the process, they would keep alive the memory of those pious figures, and connect themselves to the legacies those scholars bestowed to the larger community.

One such exemplary scholar was Sayyid Muhammad Ḥasan al-Shīrāzī, also known as Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī, whose piety and scholarship were revered far beyond the confines of the seminaries of higher learning. Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī was born in 1230 A.H./1814 C.E., to a scholarly family in Shiraz, and began his studies from a very young age in that city. He traveled first to the city of Isfahan, then to the seminaries of Iraq to continue his education. He was one of the most distinguished disciples of the singular marji' of his time, Shaykh Murṭaḍā al-Anṣārī, who he succeeded as the primary marji' of the Shi'i world. Later, Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī moved to the predominantly Sunni city of Samarra, establishing that city as a center of Shi'i learning for generations of scholars after him. It was in Samarra that he issued his famous decree banning tobacco use, so as to oppose the Qajar Nasir al-Din Shah's 1889 concession to a British corporation. The concession had given the British a monopoly on all tobacco produced, sold, and exported from Iran. This decree of Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī was one of his lasting legacies, not only because of its effectiveness in ending the concession in a matter of months, but also for its later social and political ramifications in Iranian society. Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī died in 1312 A.H./1895 C.E., and is buried in Najaf.

The following anecdotes are reported by the contemporary marji', Sayyid Mūsā al-Shubayrī al-Zanjānī, and collected in his book, Jur'eh-yi az Daryā. They are presented in a casual yet authoritative tone. On the one hand, they mirror the

tradition of hadith-reports that begin by mentioning a chain of narrators; on the other, they are accounts by some of Mīrzā's closest students and devotees of his personal virtues and erudition. We hope that these anecdotes can inspire ways of living a life of virtue, and can renew a memory and connection to those pious scholars within the Shi'i tradition.

Transliteration note: This article was translated from Persian, and will reflect the original language of the author. It will generally not reflect the Arabic-specific transliteration standards, for example the definite article (al-) before names, e.g. "Mīrzā Shīrāzī".

The Four Pillars

All four pillars of a true scholar—characteristics which if found in someone indicate that he is worthy of the status and rank of *marji'iyah*—were present in the person of Mīrzā Shīrāzī. These characteristics are: an unparalleled scholarship and knowledge, piety and fear of God, a completely virtuous character, and, finally, an unmatched intellect. These four characteristics were present in their most perfect form in the person of Mīrzā Shīrāzī. No one can doubt the scholarship and knowledge of Mīrzā. Even if there were no evidence of his knowledge other than his students and disciples, they would suffice in proving his scholarship. The very fact that every true thinker and scholar after Mīrzā was trained by him proves the greatness of his scholarship. This is similar to Waḥīd Bihbahānī, who trained students like the great Baḥr al-'Ulūm, Ṣāḥib al-Rīyāḍ, Kāshif al-Ghiṭā', Mīrzā Mahdī Shahrīstānī, Sayyid Muḥsin A'rajī and Mulla Mahdī Narāqī. The caliber of these students testifies to the excellent level of Bihbahānī's own scholarship.

In Shi'i history, there are two scholars—two true masters—whose students were the most important scholars of their [respective] eras: one is Waḥīd Bihbahānī, the other, Mīrzā Shīrāzī.

A Father's Test

Additionally, Mīrzā Shīrāzī truly loved scholarship. Meaning, in addition to the fact that he was a profound thinker and master-scholar, he also had a special affinity for learning. I have heard the following examples in support of this:

One such case is the following: Sayyid Ḥājj Mahdī Rūḥānī narrates from his uncle, the late Sayyid Aḥmad, who in turn narrates from the late Sayyid Abd al-Hādī, and he from the late Mīrzā ‘Alī Shīrāzī, the son of Mīrzā [Shīrāzī], who was a *marjī’ al-taqlīd* in his own right. Mīrzā ‘Alī said, “Towards the end of Mīrzā’s final illness, his health had deteriorated to such an extent that it wasn’t clear whether he had passed or was still alive. We had to somehow determine his state. One person said to Mīrzā, ‘A dignitary on behalf of the Ottoman government has come to visit your graciousness.’ The signs of life did not appear in Mīrzā’s body. Another said, ‘The Iranian ambassador has come to pay his respects.’ But there was still no effect.”

Mīrzā ‘Alī then said, “I know how to test my father’s state of consciousness.” He then whispers in the ear of Mīrzā Shīrāzī, “What is the ruling of burnt bread?” Mīrzā stirs. Then he says, “How shall we determine its ruling? Insofar as it falls under the category of eating the repulsive (*khabīthah*), should we say that it is forbidden? Or should we say that it is forbidden insofar as it is harmful? Or do we say that if we were to prohibit it, then the unburnt bread that is mixed with the burnt would also be wasted? The corollary of this prohibition, therefore, would be the prohibition of another thing [that was not originally prohibited], and this causes a conflict in act. From this respect then, should we say that the prohibition is not in effect?” Mīrzā analyzed all those derivations while in that state on his deathbed.

Unbroken Silence

I heard from the late Shaykh Riḍā Zanjānī, who narrated from the late Shaykh [Abd al-Karīm Hā’irī,] who said, “We were sitting in Mīrzā’s lecture, when one of Mīrzā’s top-tier students began a side discussion (I believe it may have been Sayyid Muḥammad Fishārakī or someone else who was also among his most prominent students). In the middle of his lecture, Mīrzā says to Sayyid

Muḥammad, “Sir, please be quiet.” Sayyid Muḥammad is dismayed, and says, “Sir, we were both talking. Why do you single me out for reproach? Why do you only direct your criticism to me? Why do you only address me?” (This next section was reported by Shaykh Murtaḍā Ḥā’irī.) It is at this moment that Mīrzā says, “These issues that you are just now considering, we thought about and resolved 40 years ago. We even considered other issues [that you have not even thought of.]” Mīrzā becomes upset. He falls into a total and unbroken silence, and no one else would dare speak. (This next section was also narrated by Shaykh Riḍā Zanjānī.) After a long while, Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī Shīrāzī tried to break the silence. He asked a question about a passage from Shaykh [Anṣārī’s] book on ritual purity. He asked, “Sir, what does this statement of the Shaykh mean?” And Mīrzā proceeds to explain the text.

[The late Shaykh Abd al-Karīm Ḥā’irī]((It should be noted that Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Ḥā’irī was one of the preeminent *marājī’* of his time, and reestablished the Qumm seminary in the 20th century. Shaykh al-Ḥā’irī’s own intellectual achievement is what makes his following statement so exceptional.))said, “I am so full of regret that I did not write what [Mīrzā] said in response. Afterward, however much we tried to make sense of that passage, we could not decipher it. We simply could not understand what Shaykh [al-Anṣārī] was attempting to convey. It seems that [the passage] was not clear for Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī either.”

This anecdote provides an insight into how astute but critical Mīrzā was of his own intellectual positions. At times, when we approach a tradition as long lasting and intricate as Islamic law or legal theory, it is difficult to appreciate how critical scholars can be of that tradition’s received conclusions. As this anecdote shows, eminent Shi’i scholars are constantly engaged in the process of reconsidering the fatāwā and conclusions of their forebearers. At the same time, those scholars understand their precarious position as stewards of God’s law, and recognize their own intellectual limitations. Thus, they are careful to not reach hasty conclusions or overrule fatāwā of their predecessors, particularly those that have passed the test of time, lasting the critical scrutiny of multiple generations of previous scholars. There are some parallels here to other

academic disciplines, like the various fields of science or law, where the consensus of a community of scholars is treated with value and thoughtful consideration. These two qualities, of critical renewal but also of a reluctance to diverge from received wisdom, characterize the internal logic that animates Islamic law, a logic that can be difficult for a person not steeped in the Islamic legal tradition to decipher.

In addition, the anecdote is telling of Mīrzā's self-restraint. His measured response to his student's unfounded criticism is telling not only of his erudition, but of his total command of his behavior; in the face of a frustrating situation, he chose silence.



Adults and children recite the Qur'an in the sanctuary outside the holy burial site of Imam Husayn (‘a).

Intellectual Acuity

In terms of his thinking, he had an incredibly astute and dexterous mind. In

general, Najafi-style discussions and Samarra'i-style discussion are fundamentally different; they abide by two entirely different methods. Conclusive statements are a hallmark of Najafi scholars, whereas uncertainty and inconclusive statements are the signature method of Samarra'i scholars. Shaykh Mujtahidi used to phrase it in this way: the quintessential word of Najafis was "Indeed," (*innamā*) whereas the quintessential word of Samarra'i scholars was "Perhaps" (*la'alla*).

Anyway, because Mīrzā's mind was so adroit, he would frequently reconsider his scholarly positions. He was also a very pious and God-fearing individual. If he wanted to simply present his juridical decree (*fatwā*) quickly and without due consideration, he would fall in dubious legal territory. Hence he would frequently say, "Obey precaution [in this issue]," and would rarely present his juridical decree. Sometimes arguments are made against a jurist who calls to precaution (*iḥityāt*), namely that it causes undue burden and is difficult to abide by. Some jurists defend the call to legal precaution by stating, "Mīrzā fulfilled the role of *marjī-i taqlid* for a very long time, and he would call his followers to abide by precaution. And yet, this call to precaution did not cause any major problems or conflicts."

Both in terms of his knowledge and scholarship and in terms of his piety the Mīrzā was unanimously revered and deferred to by all the eminent students and scholars of his time, all of whom were exceptional in their own piety and other qualities. Take, for example, Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī Shīrāzī. Even Fāḍil Ardakānī—who was a peer of Shaykh Anṣārī and then held the same rank as Mīrzā Shīrāzī—called others to follow Mīrzā's juridical opinions. He would take issue with anyone else who would write their own legal manuals (and declare their *marjī'iyyah*), saying, "Has it been somehow ordained that every other person will write a legal manual? The Mīrzā is a great scholar and is also very pious."

Mīrzā's Forbearance

Hajj Sayyid Abū al-Faḍl Zanjānī would narrate the following from his father,

Hājj Sayyid Muḥammad Zanjānī, “I once visited Mīrzā, and he was busy responding to a legal query (istiftā’). A sayyid entered, and requested some (financial) assistance. Mīrzā didn’t attend to him. The sayyid then snapped, “On the Day of Judgment, all this gold and silver will become snakes and scorpions. It will all become fire, and will be hung from your neck!”

Mīrzā’s acquaintances and servants wanted to force the man out because of his disrespectful behavior, but Mīrzā, who had the highest level of *adab*, did not permit them to do so, and forbade them from bothering the man. He called the man back, and when he returned, Mīrzā apologized, saying, “I was in the middle of responding to a legal query and didn’t notice your request.” He then gave the man some money, and the man left. As he was leaving, the only response that Mīrzā uttered was, “It is clear that this gentleman’s utter desperation has caused him to lose his patience.” This is all that Mīrzā said in response [to that man’s disrespect.]

Don’t Involve Yourself!

Mīrzā Shīrāzī’s intellectual genius is universally accepted. Many anecdotes are reported in this regard. For example, there was a time (in Samarra) when tensions between the Shi’a and Sunni were very high, to such an extent that it led to some violent and fatal conflicts. The situation was so dire that the late Shaykh Mujtahidi Tabrizi narrates from Hajj Shaykh Abd al-Karim Ha’iri, who said, “There was some furniture and wares in our basement that needed to be moved and relocated to a different house. We called a porter, and however much we urged him to come and assist in moving the wares, he would refuse. He was afraid that if he were to enter the basement, he would be held and then killed. Anyway, the situation in those days was that difficult and tense.

It was during such circumstances that the British sent an envoy to Mīrzā to assist him. The envoy said, “We will provide you with whatever assistance you request. We are at your service.” Mīrzā responded, “This is a domestic dispute. Two brothers are having a disagreement. It is not right for an outsider to involve himself. We will resolve this ourselves; the situation does not call for

your involvement.”

In short, he did not accept their offer. The Ottoman sultan got wind of this event. He, in turn, sent the following notice: “Mīrzā is to be obeyed in whatever issue he ordains. Act according to his decree.” But Mīrzā does not permit this (either).

Mīrzā’s Acuity and Astuteness

Mīrzā was an incredibly intelligent person, and was profoundly perceptive and discerning. Ḥājj Sayyid Riḍā Ṣadr narrated a story from the famous public lecturer, Ḥājj Shaykh Ansari, ((This is not the famous Shaykh Murṭaḍā al-Anṣārī, who was a teacher of Mīrzā al-Shīrāzī.)) who in turn narrated from Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm Hā’irī, who said:

Towards the end of Mīrzā’s life, when Mīrzā’s authority and legitimacy were both extensively acknowledged, it was hard to get an audience with him, because of the large number of meetings people requested. Of course, he was very advanced in age, and there were many issues for him to attend to. Therefore, every few days or so, he would hold a public audience so as to attend to the concerns of all the people who wanted to visit him. During one of these public sessions, some individuals noticed that Mīrzā is paying attention to a particular individual. Regardless of whoever else proceeds to pay their respects to Mīrzā, he still has his attention set on that individual. Until finally, it is that individual’s turn to step forward and pay his respects to Mīrzā. Mīrzā asks him, for example, “Where are you from?” The man responds, “From Karbala.” Mīrzā asks, “Why have you come here?” He says, “I have come to study here in Samarra.” Mīrzā then says, “I command you return to Karbala immediately. I will provide for you the same stipend and privileges of the students who study in this city, but in Karbala. You must return to Karbala immediately.”

Mīrzā then calls his servant and asks him, “When does the [next] train depart?” He says, for example, “Half an hour from now.” Mīrzā then says, “Take this man to the train [station] immediately, and wait there until he is able to embark for Karbala. Then, you may return.”

Half an hour or so later, Mīrzā continues to ask, “Why has the servant not returned?” He was anxiously waiting as he counted down the minutes until his servant’s arrival. Finally, the servant returned, and Mīrzā says, “Did you send him on his way?” He says, “Yes.” Mīrzā replies, “Were you personally there when the train departed?” He responds, “Yes.” Mīrzā asks, “So his departure is final?” He says, “Yes.” Mīrzā would continuously ask until it was certain that the individual had returned to Karbala.

Later, some of those close to Mīrzā asked him, “Why did you have this individual return to Karbala with such determination?” He responded, “I deciphered from this individual’s appearance that if he were to remain in Samarra, he would disrupt all the work we have done here by just reciting certain curses. ((Mīrzā was concerned here that the student would recite curses against individuals revered by other Islamic schools of thought.)) All the work we have done and all the difficulties we have endured in successfully quelling the disputes between the Sunnis and the Shi‘a so that this city may become a center for the Shi‘a, these would all be ruined because of one such act. All that effort would be for naught if he were to recite a single curse in the ḥaram [of Samarra].”

Later, some people reported meeting that individual, and he said, “What a decent man Mīrzā is! He didn’t even let me recite a single [curse!]”

This story is telling of the incredible sagacity and astuteness of Mīrzā. He was aware and sensitive to such issues, and could discern the attitudes and behaviors of people simply by seeing them.

The Perfection of Virtues

In short, Mīrzā was an incredible person. One could dare say that such an individual, who has acquired all these disparate perfections within himself, is rare among our scholars. He was a person who was both at the peak of scholarship, and was also an exemplar of virtuosity; he had both immense piety, and a profound intellect.