

Muqaddas Ardabili: Role Model of Piety

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Abstract

Muqaddas Ardabili was one of the greatest Shiite Muslim scholars of the tenth century AH. As a prominent jurist and especially due to possessing a high level of morality and spirituality, he was admired and praised by scholars. In this paper, after a brief biography, we talk about his scientific and social activities, mention his works and students, and describe some of his moral and mystical characteristics.

Keywords: *moral scholars, morality, Muqaddas Ardabili, mysticism.*

Birthday

In the beginning of the tenth century AH (ca. 905 AH), a blessed child was born in Ardabil. After growing up and completing his education

and spiritual wayfaring, he reached a level of knowledge and piety that he is still regarded among role models for scholars and the pious.

His name was Ahmad son of Mohammad. He was born in a family who loved the Ahl al-Bayt (a). After growing up and receiving rudimentary education, he immigrated to Najaf to complete his studies and spiritual wayfaring near the holy shrine of Imam Ali (a).

He learnt traditional sciences and fiqh from Sayyid Ali Sa'igh and other teachers of the seminary of Najaf. Sayyid Ali Sa'igh was among the distinguished students of Shahid Thani, and he really loved Ahmad (Amin al-'Amili 1406 AH, 7:154).

During his blessed life, Ahmad never gave up seeking knowledge. Whenever he found out about a man of knowledge, he tried to go to him and benefit from his knowledge. Once he immigrated to Shiraz to benefit from the great philosopher and pious scholar, Jamal al-Din Mahmud (among the students of the famous philosopher Jalal al-Din Dawani), and studies rational sciences for some time. He endeavored so much in knowledge and piety that he became famous as "Muqaddas" (saint), and so powerful in research that he was also called "Muhayqiq" (researcher).

In the Words of Great People

He is among the great figures who are highly praised by scholars. Sayyid Mustafa Tafrishi, a contemporary of Muqaddas Ardabili, said, "His honor in magnanimity, certitude, and trust is more famous than to be introduced and higher than to be described. He was a theologian, a high-ranking expert in fiqh, the most pious person of his time, and most worshipping among them all" (Tafrishi ۱۳۷۷ Sh, 29).

Sheikh Hurr al-‘Amili (1033-1104 AH), who is himself among great figures in religion and knowledge, wrote, “Ahmad b. Muhammad Ardabili was a meritorious scholar, pious researcher, trustworthy one, and with great position, contemporary with Sheikh Baha’i.” (Hurr al-‘Amili n.d., 23).

Allama Majlisi (1037-1110 AH) wrote, “In holiness of soul, piety, asceticism, and virtues, Muhaqqiq Ardabili reached the final station, and I do not know any great person like him among those preceding him or those after him... his books are at the highest levels of accuracy and scholarship” (Majlisi 1403 AH, 1:42).

The respected hadith scholar, Haj Sheikh Abbas Qummi (1294-1359 AH) wrote, “The great Sheikh, spiritual scholar, researcher, and jurist, known as Muhaqqiq Ardabili, reached such a high level in knowledge, virtue, worship, piety, trustworthiness, God-wariness, and grandeur that cannot be described. In holiness and *taqwa*, he reached such a high level that he became an exemplar. Indeed, the radiations of the beauty of his meritorious scholarship shone so well that is not hidden to anyone” (Qummi 1387 Sh, 23).

Muqaddas Ardabili and the Safavid Court

Due to different religious and political reasons, Safavid kings respected Shia scholars and asked their opinions about different issues. Although this respect was politically motivated, scholars greatly benefited from this situation for promoting Shiism. As a result of their interactions with the Safavid kings, Shia scholars were able to bring out Shiism out of isolation, and Shiism became the official religion of the Safavid Empire.

Muqaddas Ardabili was among the scholars who made great efforts to promote Shiism through their connection with the Safavid court.

Although he rejected the request of Shah Abbas to leave Najaf and move to Iran, he always used his influence on the Safavid court for the benefit of the Shia. For instance, it is reported that once, Shah Abbas became angry at one of his agents. The agent fled and took refuge with Muqaddas Ardabili, asking him for help. Muqaddas wrote the following letter to Shah Abbas:

O Guardian of the temporary kingdom, Abbas!
Beware that this man was first a transgressor and now he appears to be oppressed. If you forgive him, God, the Pure and Almighty, may forgive some of your faults.

- Servant of the King of Wilaya, Ahmad Ardabili
(Qummi 1387 Sh, 25)

This is among wonderful letters in which the king is not praised and the writer introduces himself a servant of Imam Ali (a), not a servant of the king.

Without any delay, Shah Abbas forgave the agent and wrote the following response to Muqaddas Ardabili:

This is to say that Abbas took the services you mentioned as honor and fulfilled them, in hopes that you do not forget this devotee in your prayers.

- The Dog of the door of Ali (a), Abbas (Qummi 1387 Sh, 25)

Reviver of the Seminary of Najaf

The many years of studying and spiritual wayfaring made Muqaddas Ardabili an exceptional jurist and scholar. Soon, he became the leader of the Shia and the head of Najaf Seminary. When Muqaddas Ardabili began his activities, Najaf was very dull and inactive. Few students were

studying there, and it lacked the glory of the time of Shaykh Tusi. Then Muqaddas rose as a reviver. He gave spirit to the seminary of Najaf and attracted students and seekers of knowledge to the seminary. Regarding that, Ayatullah Sayyid Hasan Sadr wrote, "At the time of Muqaddas Ardabili, the scientific immigration to Najaf started over. The seminary became powerful and people travelled to Najaf from near and far places, and the city turned to the biggest scholarly center" (Khalili 1987, 7:57).

The Seat of Teaching

During his precious life, Muqaddas Ardabili provided valuable services for the Shia world. After acquiring high levels of knowledge, he began teaching. He taught his students with great patience. He believed that the textbooks needed to be purified of unnecessary discussion; thus, he avoided teaching things which had no benefit. He had a lot of students, many of whom became distinguished figures, such as the following:

1. Shaykh Hasan (d. 1011 AH), son of Shahid Thani (author of *Ma'alim al-usul* and *al-Muntaqa*)
2. Sayyid Muhammad (d. 1009 AH), Shahid Thani's grandson (his daughter's son), known as Sahib Madarik
3. Mir Fayd Allah Tafrishi
4. 'Inayat Allah Kuhpayih'i, a scholar in Rijal
5. Mulla 'Abd Allah Shushtari (d. 1021 AH)

His Works

In addition to teaching, Muhaqqiq Ardabili produced valuable works in theology, jurisprudence, and history of the Ahl al-Bayt (a), some of which are lost. A list of some of his works is as follows:

1. *Istinas al-ma'nawiyya* (in Kalam)
2. *Bahr al-manaqib*
3. *Hashiya bar sharh Tajrid*

4. *Hadiqat al-Shia*
5. *Risala kharajiyya*
6. *Zubdat al-bayan fi ayat al-Qur'an*
7. *Maqala fi al-amr bi al-shay'*
8. *Manasik hajj* (in Persian)
9. *Majma' al-fa'ida wa al-burhan fi sharh irshad al-adhban*

The last work is one of the deepest and most famous encyclopedias and valuable sources of Ja'fari fiqh that has always been referred to by Mujtahids. Muqaddas has written this book as a commentary on 'Allama al-Hilli's *Irshad*.

Muqaddas' Conduct

Muqaddas Ardabili was very humble before his students. He greatly honored and dignified them. It is said that when Sheykh Hasan finished his education and wanted to return to Lebanon, he asked his teacher for an advice. Muqaddas wrote the hadiths he had compiled in a paper and gave it to him. He added at the bottom of the paper, "God's servant wrote it for his friend, following his order, in hopes that he remembers" ('Amili 1390 Sh, 2:202).

Sincerity in learning and teaching was among prominent characteristics of Muqaddas Ardabili. Once, in a gathering, Mulla 'Abd Allah Shushtari, a student of Muqaddas Ardabili, asked his teacher about an issue. Muqaddas answered him, but the student was not convinced and the discussion continued; suddenly, Muqaddas became silent and after a moment said, "Let this discussion be for later, I need to check out a book!" He then got up and told the student to go with him somewhere. After going out of that gathering, Muqaddas gave such a deep and accurate answer for the question that the student was totally convinced. The student asked, "Sir, why didn't you give this wonderful answer in the gathering?" Muqaddas Ardabili replied, "Because we were at the

presence of people in the gathering and our intentions might have become showing off and boasting against each other. But there is no such thing here, because only God, the Almighty, is seeing our conversation” (Jaza’iri 1429 AH, 3:40).

Helping the needy was another characteristic of Muqaddas Ardabili. It is reported that in a year of famine, Muqaddas Ardabili had little provision which only sufficed his family. However, he was not happy that his family had food while many people were in need. So he shared his provisions with the needy. His wife became angry and said, “In such a drought, you gave all our provision to the poor and now my children have to stretch their hands begging others?” Muqaddas did not say anything and went out of the house towards the mosque of Kufa. He had decided to stay in the mosque for some days in worship and prayer (*i’tikaf*). On the second day of his stay in the mosque, an Arab man took some wheat and flour to the house of Muqaddas Ardabili and gave them to Muqaddas’ wife and said, “The owner of the house has made *i’tikaf* in the mosque and has sent these for you. After some days, when Muqaddas returned home, his wife told him, “The wheat and flour you sent were of great quality.” When Muqaddas heard that, he realized that it has been from the mercy of God” (Ibid., 2:302).

In the Realm of Wonders

Some wonders have been reported from the life of this pious faqih and mystic, of which two instances are mentioned below:

Mir ‘Allam (Mir Fayd Allah), who was a pious scholar and a student and close friend of Muqaddas Ardabili said, “I lived in a school, the rooms of which were opened in the courtyard of the shrine of Imam Ali (a). At a dark night, after I finished my studies, I came out of my room and was looking around when I saw a man going fast towards the

shrine of Imam Ali (a). I thought the man was a thief who wanted to rob the shrine and steal the lamps! So I followed him in a way that he did not notice. When I went closer, I realized that he was our master Muqaddas Ardabili. I saw that he went toward the shrine and waited for a short time. Instantly, the lock on the door was unlocked and the door opened, then the second and third doors opened in the same way. I saw that he went near the holy grave, he offered greetings and was answered from the grave. I heard him and realized that he was speaking about a scholarly issue with Imam Ali (a). He then went out of the shrine towards the mosque of Kufa, and I followed him again. When he arrived at the mosque, he approached the niche and again I heard him talking to a great person about the same issue. After he received his answer, he went out. When he arrived at the gate of the city, the sun had risen already. Before he passes the gate, I called him loudly and said, 'O our master! I was with you all the way since the beginning till the end. Who were the two great persons with whom you discussed scholarly issues?' When Muqaddas heard me, he first asked me to promise not to tell anyone about that as long as he was alive and then said, "O my son! Many times when I don't understand an issue, I go to the holy shrine of Imam Ali (a) and tell him about the issue and receive his answer for it. Tonight, also I went to the Imam (a) but he referred me to Imam al-Mahdi (a) and said, 'My son Mahdi (a) is in the mosque of Kufa; go to him and ask him your questions. That man you saw at the mosque of Kufa was Imam al-Mahdi (a)'" (Majlisi 1403 AH, 52:174).

Once, he saw Prophet Muhammad (s) and Prophet Moses (a) in a dream sitting together. Prophet Moses (a) asked the Prophet (s) [about Muqaddas], "Who is this man?" The Prophet (s) answered, "Ask him." Prophet Moses (a) asked Muqaddas, "Who are you?" Muqaddas answered, "I am Ahmad son of Muhammad from Ardabil and I live in

such-and-such a place.” Prophet Moses (a) was surprised and said, “I asked you about your name, what was all this information for?” Muqaddas answered, “When God, the Almighty, asked you, ‘What is this in your hand?’ why did you give such a prolonged and detailed answer?”¹⁹ Prophet Moses (a) told the Prophet (s), “You were right saying “The scholars among my people are like the prophets of Bani Israel” (Tunkabuni 1389 Sh, 345).

His Demise

In Rajab 993 AH, the sun of fiqh and knowledge, which had risen from Ardabil, sat in Najaf after years of tireless efforts in the way of Islam. And while this sunset was for his body, his soul continued to illuminate through his precious works. The body of Muqaddas Ardabili was buried in the holy shrine of Imam Ali (a).

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¹⁹ Referring to the verse (20:18) in this verse, God asked Moses (a), “What is this in your hand?” He replied, “It is my staff. I lean upon it, and with it I beat down leaves for my sheep; and I have other uses for it.”

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