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Traditional religious practices in Yoruba palaces
- M.Y. Nabofa*
The Urhobo Bible
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The ruler factor in the islamization of the Yoruba, 1840-1940
- E.A. Emeke*
Humility in religion and psychology
- M.D. Bryant*
African wisdom and the recovery of the earth
- J.E. Ife*
Marriage with the gods in Nigerian and Greek myths
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The economic dimension of West African history
- P.A. Ogundeji*
Yoruba drama and religion: the pre- and post-colonial situations
- Christian Gaba*
Malnutrition and child health care in Africa: Religion's responsibility

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Statement of Purpose

The aim of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan is to promote the study and understanding of "the phenomenon and the social implications of religion in general and religion in Africa in particular". This involves more specifically "the field of history and phenomenology of religion, theology and philosophy, aiming at an interpretation and understanding of African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam, separately and in so far as there has been cross-fertilization between them". The Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies contributes to the fulfilment of this purpose.

Every effort will be made to give an equal amount of space to articles and reviews dealing with each of the three Faiths, and to encourage articles which treat their interaction. The phenomenon of secularization, which represents a common problem for them all will also not be neglected.

"ORITA"

ORITA is a Yoruba word meaning "where the ways meet". The cover design is by Charles Umezude. It seeks to represent the coming together of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion in the Journal.

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HUMILITY IN RELIGION AND PSYCHOLOGY

by
E.A. Emeke

Does humility play a significant role in improving interpersonal relationships and in making a better society? To answer this question, we must examine what view religion and psychology hold regarding humility, survey areas of agreement and divergence in the two disciplines, assess the value of humility in the improvement of the quality of life and the individual and relationships in society, and finally review strategies employed in imparting the concept of humility in individuals.

How religion views humility

"Religion" in this article is restricted to the Christian religion. Islam and African traditional religion are left aside because a search of the literature showed no synthesized and concise view of humility in these other two religions. The Christian religion, on the other hand, has a well developed view of the concept, with volumes and volumes of literature written by Christian scholars, clergy and laymen. With no equivalent synthesized views from the other religions, the writer strongly feels that it would be unfair to draw comparisons or parallels to these other religions in this article.

The meaning of humility

The English word "humility" derives from the Latin *humilis*, meaning "lowly", "near the ground".

In the Old Testament, Yahweh is seen as the ruler of history and of his people and the giver of salvation. The people saw that humility is the only fitting attitude before him. "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men on the face of the earth" (Num 12:2). The prophets call again and again for humility towards Yahweh, lest his wrath be kindled against Israel (Amos 6:8, Jer 13:16, Isaiah 49:13, Micah 6:8). Yahweh upholds the humble (Ps 25:9, 131, 149:4).

In the New Testament it is advocated that no man has any merit over another unless it be the merit of greater humility (cf. Mt 5:5). The humble man avows that he is a sinner in need of God's mercy, pardon and cleansing (the publican and the Pharisee - Lk 18:9-14). The source of all humility is Christ, who declared, "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29). The humble are not lowly, but

exalted by the Lord. The song of Mary praises this mystery (Lk 1:38-52). Thus humility turns the eyes away from one's sinfulness to blissful contemplation of the goodness and mercy of God. What we have discussed thus far is schematized in Figure 1.

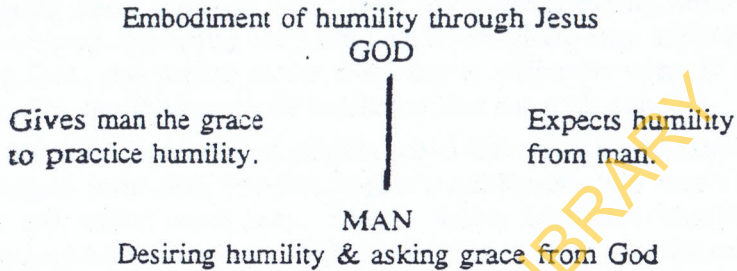


Figure 1; God-man relationship regarding humility

Humility as a virtue

The Christian religion views humility as a virtue. The word virtue in Latin conveys the notion of strength, courage and excellence. Its nominal meaning is but a faint shadow of the reality. Virtue is the stronghold of morality. Saint Thomas Aquinas says virtue is an operative habit. Virtue then acts like a second nature.

Humility, according to the Christian religion, is the virtue by which a man attributes to God all the good he possesses. Humility is a moral virtue by which a person, considering his deficiency, holds himself to what is low according to his measure, out of subjection to God. For the Christian, a humble person contains himself within his limits, not extending himself to what is above him, but subjecting himself to his superiors. According to Thomas Aquinas, by humility man subjects himself to God out of reverence, and therefore to others because of God.

Humility is the moral virtue by which the human will accepts readily the fact that all of a person's good nature and grace, being and action is a gift of God's creative and salvific love, and by which one wants consequently to "unself" the self radically in thought, word or deed, in order to be true to his being.

Humility connotes not being presumptuous. Being a virtue,

humility is a habit meant for action. It is a good disposition of the appetite for rational excellence. A habit, as we know, is nothing more than the inclination of the activity of some faculty to flow in a given moral direction.

After the theological virtues (charity, founded on faith and hope), which constitute the soul of man's moral activity by immediately connecting him with God (Col 3:14), humility is the most important moral virtue, since it regulates the whole of virtuous life by submitting it to the true order of being. Humility is the foundation of all virtues. It opens man to the gifts of the Father by breaking open the closed and separated selfhood.

Humility is both truth and justice. Under the title of justice, it inclines us to act conformably with direction; under the title of truth, it undertakes to direct us. As truth, it resides in the intellect; as justice, it dwells in the will. These two faculties act one upon the other.

A traditional versus a modern view of humility

It must be pointed out at this juncture that religion has not always, in the view of the writer, considered humility positively. The traditional concept of humility in religion is that of contempt for one's self. In this concept, the humble person must confess his vileness and convince others of it. This view was held for a long time and many Church theologians perpetuated this concept in their writings (e.g. St. Anselm and St. Benedict), and many Church saints practised this in their lives. In this regard, St. Anselm says:

Acknowledge yourself contemptible; grieve for this and confess it. But that is not enough; convince others of this; nay more, wish them to believe it. But neither does this suffice. Hence, if others speak of you in terms of contempt, bear patiently with them, and do so even if they treat you with contempt.

We may challenge this concept and ask ourselves: what advantage will our neighbour derive from having contempt of us? What inspiration will our vileness produce in his mine? What need has he of knowing our wretchedness? Truly this concept of humility is something against which our poor human nature revolts.

Since humility is not merely a monastic virtue, but the virtue of every Christian, consider the outcome of this traditional concept for a man's earthly career, were he to manifest his deficiencies and moral

failings to the world. Death by starvation for himself and his family would be the result, for no one would employ him anywhere.

A more modern concept of humility is the subjection of man to God. This view can also be found in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. In this concept, man need not compromise himself in any way, nor go to the extent of such self-abasement that he is worth nothing before others. For Thomas and other modern theologians, the highest degree of humility consists in knowing oneself, knowing one's deficiencies, and knowing one's need for God. This would mean raising one's eyes heavenward, confessing one's sins both to God and to man, seeking help from God, and striving harder every day to realize the virtue in one's life. The humble man seeks excellence, but not at all cost.

The modern concept of humility views that man's whole excellence is entirely from God; therefore to gain it and preserve it is man's main task and most sacred duty. Man's whole excellence consists in subjecting himself to God. With this in mind, the humble man accepts the various trials and humiliations of life which come to him, and counts them all as nothing provided they enhance his subjection to God. Thomas Aquinas linked humility to magnanimity¹. Magnanimity consists chiefly in encouraging the self to attempt great things, strengthening it against the poison of despair. Humility therefore should be defined not in terms of lowliness and self-contempt, but in terms of selfless and subjection to God.

Christ as a model of humility

Jesus said, "Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Mt 11:29). God himself showed himself humble in Jesus Christ. This *kenosis* is the reason why Christians must strive for the same attitude towards each other (Phil 2:5-11). Humility is intimately bound up with love (1 Cor 10:24, 13:4) and must therefore become a basic attitude towards others. Since all human virtues can become vehicles of self-assertive pride as well as self-emptying love, humility is the peculiar virtue that excludes the former. All this can be summed up in Figure 2:

¹*Summa theologiae*, II, II, q. 129, a. 3 & 4.

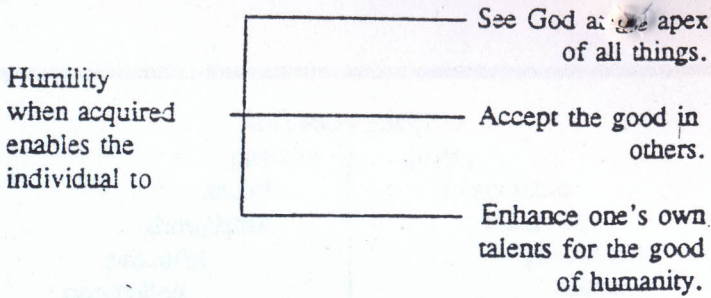


Figure 2: The orientation of humility

Humility and psychology

Though not specifically represented in the array of psychological terms, humility can be placed in the area of personality. Personality refers to an individual's social effectiveness, and is built up by learning social skills and improving one's appearance, so as to elicit more favourable reactions from others:

Another common conception of personality is based on an individual's most striking characteristics. Thus we have an "aggressive personality", a "shy personality" etc. Humility is a characteristic that distinguishes an individual from others, for a humble person is distinctively known. Humility therefore is a personality trait.

Humility, like all other personality traits, gets organized within a particular individual and is exhibited in behaviour - which can be defined as the result of interaction between personality traits and the social and physical conditions of the situation.

The shaping of humility

Humility is a characteristic of temperament which, like many other personality traits, is found in different degrees in different individuals, and becomes sharpened with time as the individual adapts to changes in the environment and in his own general mood.

Every individual has within himself the potentiality to be humble, but whether he turns out eventually to be a humble person depends on

his experience while growing up and on what his culture and sub-culture dictates. In other words, we are saying that humility too is open to the nature-nurture concept of personality development.

It must be noted that there are no psychological theories regarding humility; neither do we have any in-depth studies of how the trait is concretely shaped in the individual. I have attempted to assess the personality organization of a person perceived to be humble through a personality inventory (not included). An analysis of this inventory, coupled with the facts found from the literature reviewed under the Christian perspective, revealed a personality organization as shown in Figure 3:

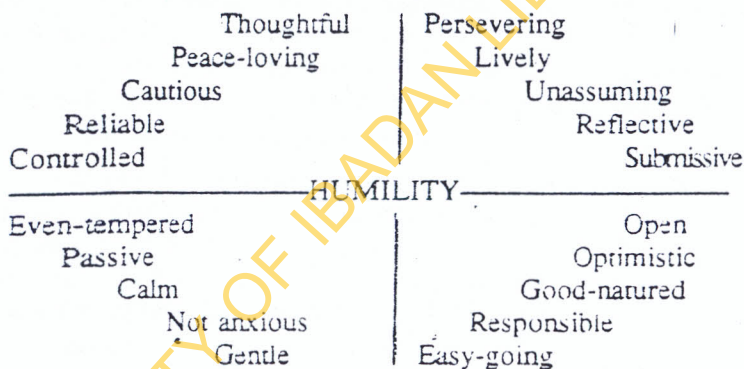


Figure 3: Personality organization in the humble person

When the above model is compared with Eysenk's (1963) personality Quadrant, it will be observed that the personality characteristics of the humble man cut across personality characteristics found in the stable, introvert and extrovert segments of the quadrant. It is not only the unstable cum melancholic segment that is not represented in the above model. It can thus be said that the humble man has a "well-rounded" and "amiable" personality. Let it be noted that there are other personality characteristics in Figure 3 that are not in Figure 4:

Humility in psychology and religion

It has been mentioned that there is a dearth of information regarding

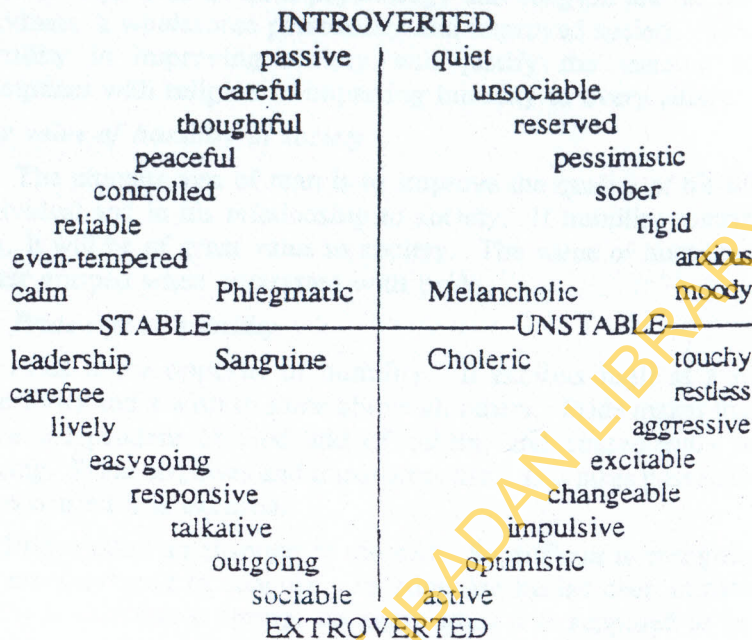


Figure 4: Eysenk's personality quadrant

humility in psychology literature. What could be responsible for this situation? Could it be due to the difference in the meaning "humility" connotes, and what psychology conceives as its concepts of man? A closer look at the basic tenets of the two disciplines may reveal some similarities, and thereby stimulate the interest of psychology in the consideration and study of the concept of humility.

Psychology encourages the concept of individuality - for a person to be himself/herself. To know and believe he is endowed with potentialities and capabilities which he can use for the good of himself and his society. All the above is also what humility in religion teaches. Genuine, and I dare say, humble Christians, and especially those dedicated to the service of the Gospel, care for their good name and that of the whole community. But not only that, they try to live up to their vocation to be light to the world. This is one of the motives of psychology, and this is also a part of the missionary motive of religion,

upheld by the virtue of humility.

Psychology advocates that the individual should be assertive. The Apostle of the Gentiles (Paul) does not think that the motive of assertiveness contradicts humility. He says to care as much about each other as about yourselves (cf. Gal 6:2). Humility does not require that a man subject what there is of God in himself to what seems to be of God in another. Much as religion views that the humble man sees that there is some good in his neighbour which he himself lacks, or some evil in himself which is not necessarily in another, or is able to see his own nothingness and readily accept the superiority of others over him where such exists, humility does not demand that one believes his own gifts are less than another's, nor that he is the least perfect creature that ever left God's hands. Even in Scripture, humility is seen as meaning the forming of a just estimate of oneself: "My son, glorify yourself with humility, and ascribe to yourself honour according to your worth" (Sirach 10:28). In all the foregoing, religion and psychology agree as to what the notion of humility should be.

Humility does not need one to drop his own reasoned convictions on, say, political affairs and submit to the views of another. It is not necessarily pride that makes an artist prefer his own works to those of big names in the field. Posterity may confirm his judgment. Neither is it a sin against lowliness of heart to feel that one is not the greatest sinner in the world.

It may appear that psychology stays away from propagating the concept of humility, since it sometimes connotes the idea of complacency and apathy, which psychology views as a negation of its own belief that man should assert himself and explore to the maximum his potentials. But we have seen that this is a wrong understanding of humility. True humility, as Carlson (1952) notes, is not to be confused with timidity or self-disparagement.

Psychology propagates the view that a person must have confidence in himself and in his capabilities, interests, worth and value. He should have a favourable attitude towards life and making achievements. A negative view of humility in religion may present a picture opposed to this. But a deeper probe will reveal that in the Christian religion humility restrains unreasonable daring and strengthens the mind against fear. Hence the excess of daring self-confidence is taken care of by humility, while it is not itself opposed to self-confidence. I dare submit

that the objectives of both psychology and religion are the same, i.e. goodness, a wholesome personality and improved society. The role of humility in improving society will justify the teaming of other disciplines with religion in imparting humility to every citizen.

The value of humility in society

The ultimate aim of man is to improve the quality of his life as an individual and in his relationship to society. If humility contributes to this, it will be of great value to society. The value of humility will be better grasped when contrasted with pride.

Pride versus humility

Pride is the opposite of humility. It exhibits itself as a sense of superiority and a wish to shine above all others. Pride makes man want to be independent of God and of others, and consequently be self-seeking. Pride disguises and transforms itself as it takes possession, and when noticed it is excused.

Pride makes an absolute of the self. So difficult to recognize, it is still more difficult to conquer. Its roots are buried deep in nature; its vitality is extreme; it springs up again when it is supposed to be dead. It always reaches out and is never satisfied. Humility, on the other hand, rises from an inordinate quest of one's own excellence and seeks that excellence which is in accord with reason. The cultivation of humility is the remedy of pride.

Other vices opposed to humility

Pride is not the only vice opposed to humility. Others are sloth, envy, discord, vainglory, strife and hatred. Shown graphically in Figure 5, all these vices are capable of ruining both an individual and a society. Humility can conquer them all. Humility abhors envy of the gifts of others or the attribution to self of superiority of talents as if they are not God-given, and it abhors the inordinate desire to demonstrate one's excellence (vainglory). Rather, humility genuinely rejoices in acknowledging the superiority of others when in fact they are superior. Humility is a remedy of self-complacency, sloth, discord, strife and hatred.

Note that all the vices have a double movement capacity. One can lead to the other, resulting in a depraved individual and an inhumane

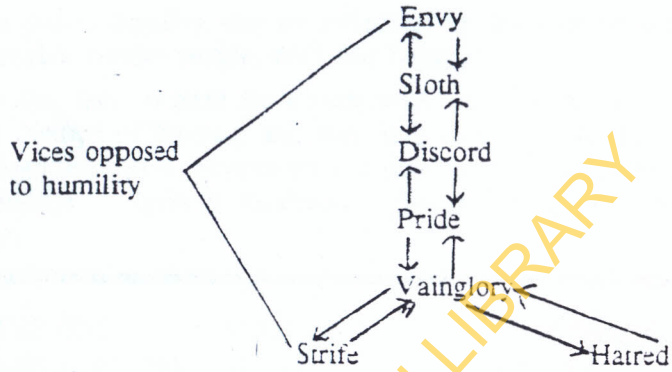


Figure 5: Vices opposed to humility

society.

Humility and a humane society

Profound changes that mark our epoch have made it more difficult to find one's own identity, ego, strength and character. The young generation is no longer rooted firmly in a family that includes several generations. The industrial and bureaucratic world tends to treat people as statistical numbers, counting only functions and achievements. People who are unable to judge their own moral values are like addicts craving for acknowledgement from others. The kind of acknowledgement given in a society of efficiency is based on success and achievement. Instead of seeking to live honourably in a moral sense, people are driven by ambitions and pretensions that have nothing to do with their character and integrity. People do anything to gain recognition from the group or the greatest possible multitude. This can promote neurosis and psychosis.

Such people are externally guided, but have no internalized rules. Yet only people who have internalized basic principles can have a clear vision of life and withstand the temptations and enslavement of every kind of ambition. A man's dedication to efficiency is often the result of mistrust in his own worth to be loved and to live his own life unbiased by the world around.

This is where humility comes in and plays its indefatigable role of

imparting reason to the individual, to see that life need not be one sad stretch of enslavement to ambition and wanting to be like the "Joneses". Humility attracts the individual to good actions and lofty heights, but repulses him from deadly ambitions and dangerous excesses.

Humility maintains peace and charity; it disperses illusion; it kills pride with all its perilous consequences, or at least reduces it in propensity and frequency. The primary function of humility is to control and moderate ambition. This enables a considerate and thoughtful individual to influence his society for good, thus improving that society and making it a better place. This is brought out by Figure 6:

Society A:

Many humble
individuals

↓
Peace, good inter-
personal relationships
and progress .

more
effective

Society B:

Many proud
individuals

↑
Strife, hatred,
unhealthy rivalry,
progress marked
with chaos

Figure 6: The relative effectiveness of pride and humility in society.

The learning of humility

How humility is learned is the next question to tackle. Humility, it has been seen, involves knowledge of self and of God. Frequent meditation upon these two produces a disposition in the reason which inclines it to grasp such thoughts easily and repeat them naturally. Because of the interplay of the intellect and the will, this disposition is partially the cause and partially the effect of acquired humility. Hence every act of virtue is prepared for by acts of thought.

In other words, the virtue of humility is imparted chiefly through cognitive meditation. In this way the individual is called upon from time to time to embrace the virtue. Through a series of reflection the

individual discovers the immense value of humility. He is thus drawn to closer intimacy with God and with his fellow man who need his humble collaboration and contribution to the growth of human society.

One learns humility also by reflecting on the lives of Jesus and other notably humble people, dead and living.

Besides, there is need for a systematic, concise, step-by-step and testable method of learning and imparting humility. In this regard, psychology, education, physiology and other disciplines should take up the challenge. Figure 7 illustrates a 5-step strategy for acquiring humility:

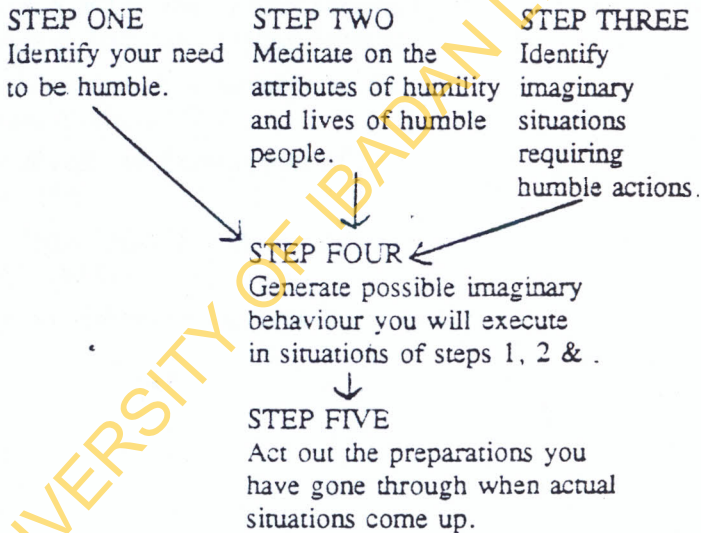


Figure 7: A 5-step strategy for acquiring humility.

Conclusion

My conclusion hinges on what I call "the humble man's mission" and the fact that the religious propensity of man makes the commendation of the concept of humility imperative.

A lot of people are religious and are not opposed to the presence of God in their lives, and most actively seek him. We can only commend to them the virtue of humility, for God only enters a life in which

humility, as Chesterton (1921) long ago aptly remarked:

What we suffer today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition, and has settled upon the organ of conviction where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has exactly been reversed. Nowadays, the part of a man that he does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert - himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt - Divine reason.

The misplacement of modesty and conviction has ruined and is ruining our society. This order must not continue or be allowed to reach its limit. Humility must come in to steer the boat of good society and re-order the outlook and actions of man. In this regard we say the humble man has a mission to accomplish.

This mission is not to be weak and stupid. His role in society is not that of an apathetic apologetic who is weak in body and in spirit. The humble man is not the one who does not know when and how to be assertive. The mission of the humble man is that of a co-creator with God, building a strong and virile society, recognizing that others too have been endowed by God with talents. His mission is to help others grow in the use of their capabilities. The humble man is a builder who shapes the lives of others so as to bring out the best in them. The mission of the humble individual is that of an encourager, not a destroyer. In humility he radiates the beauty of God, gratefully acknowledging the supremacy of the Almighty over his life and the universe he has placed him in. The humble individual has no negative self-concept, but a high and positive self-concept, though within the limits of the fact that others too exist and need to be given a chance.

What I strongly believe our society needs are humble men, for humble men are men of valour and decency; they are filled with consideration and concern for others. They are men who lift others from the miry clay and set their feet on solid ground. Humble men are men who truly love. For this reason, a family, a church, a community, a society that has them is doubly blessed. Humble men exist to improve the calibre of their society and prevent the assault on individuals and society from inappropriate interpersonal relationships and competition.

The intellectual, emotional and physical well-being of hundreds and thousands of people can be influenced beneficially by the actions of

humble individuals.

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