

ISLAM

A Brief Overview of the History of Islam

The origin of Islam is placed around 610 CE when Muhammad, a highly spiritual and religious man who spent months in praying and self contemplation in a secluded cave near the town of Mecca, is thought to have received divine messages. The story is that one morning Muhammad heard the voice of the angel Gabriel and, through him, Allah spoke words of wisdom. The words were first recited by Muhammad, later his disciples, and then recorded as text which came to known as the Holy Qur'an. Thus followers of Islam consider the Qur'an not the work of Muhammad but as direct revelations from Allah.

Islam, which literally means "submission," was founded on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as an expression of surrender to the will of Allah. The Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam, contains the teachings of the Prophet that were revealed to him from Allah. Traditional Muslims believe that Allah is the one true God with no partner or equal and that the inspiration of this belief system comes straight from God and the vehicle chosen by him to deliver these teaching to the general population, the Prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad is said to have returned from the cave a changed man. The first person he preached to on his return was his wife Khadija, who became the first disciple of this new religion. Muhammad, encouraged by this, began to preach the revelations to the public at large through his sermons.

Many people were impressed by verses of the Qur'an and converted to Islam out of their free will. However, since the growing popularity of Islam jeopardized Muhammad's and his disciples lives, the entire community moved from Mecca to Medina circa 622 CE.

This move became a crucial event in the history of Islam and came to be known as Hijra. The Muslim calendar begins with the day of this migration. The people of Medina accepted Islam with and the spread of this new religion gained momentum. Later with well-organized finances and a vast army, Muhammad conquered and converted Mecca as well. He did not stop here but sent numerous emissaries to different parts of Arabia. Today Islam remains one of the most flourishing religions in the world; it is the second largest with around 23% of the earth's population identifying as Muslim.

The main teaching in the Qur'an is the belief in Allah, the one and true God. The followers of Islam are traditionally divided into two main branches, the Sunni and Shia. Each group, although they follow the same religion, interpret certain events and teachings of Islam differently. Source: Birth of Islam (<http://festivals.awesomeji.com/barah-wafat/birth-of-islam.html>)

Many medieval Muslim thinkers pursued humanistic, rational and scientific discourses in their search for knowledge, meaning and values. A wide range of Islamic writings on history and

philosophical theology show that medieval Islamic thought was open to the humanistic ideas of individualism, secularism, skepticism and liberalism.

Islam, of course, has an extensive history. The chronology below has been considerably shortened to include some of the key dates. For a more detailed version, see: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/muslims/timeline.html>

610 CE. According to traditional Muslim belief, at the age of 40 Muhammad is visited by the angel Gabriel who recites to him the first revelations of the Qur'an and informs him that he is God's prophet. Later Muhammad is told to call his people to the worship of the one God, but some are hostile and persecute him and his followers.

622 CE. After enduring persecution in Mecca, Muhammad and his followers migrate to the nearby town of Yathrib (known as Medina) where the people there accepted Islam. This marks the "hijrah" or "emigration" and the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Muhammad establishes an Islamic state based on the laws revealed in the Quran.

630 CE. Muhammad returns to Mecca with a large number of his followers. He enters the city and eventually all its citizens accept Islam. The prophet clears the idols and images out of the Kaaba and rededicates it to the worship of God.

1000 CE. Islam continues to spread throughout Africa.

1099 CE. The European Crusaders capture Jerusalem from the Muslims. Eventually Muslims regain control of what they view as their holy land.

1120 CE. Islam continues to spread throughout Asia. Malaysian traders interact with Muslims who teach them about Islam.

Circa 1800 CE. Approximately 30 percent of Africans forced into slavery in the United States are Muslim.

1870-1924 CE. Muslim immigrants from the Arab world voluntarily come to the United States until the Asian Exclusion Act is passed in 1924.

1952 CE. The McCarran-Walter Act relaxes the United States ban on Asian immigration. Muslim students come to the U.S. from many nations.

1965 CE. Revisions of immigration law further open the doors for Muslim immigration.

The Key Principles of Islam

The unifying characteristics of Islam are the Five Pillars of Islam. The five pillars are the most important obligations of a Muslim under Sharia law and which conservative Muslims perform

faithfully. They are the foundation of traditional Muslim life and have been described in this way:

- Shahadah: The testimony that there is none worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is his messenger.
- Salah: Establishing of the five daily prayers
- Zakat: The giving of charity which is one fortieth (2.5%) of the net worth of possessions kept for more than a year, with few exemptions, for every Muslim whose wealth exceeds the nisab, and 10% or 20% of the produce from agriculture. This money or produce is distributed among the poor.
- Ramadhan: Fasting from dawn to dusk in the month of Ramadan.
- Hajj: The pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhul Hijjah, which is compulsory once in a lifetime for one who has the ability to do it.

The one on which we are focusing is Zakat since it is the pillar most closely related to the principles of humanism. Zakat is the practice of charitable giving based on accumulated wealth. It is obligatory for all Muslims who are able to do so and is the personal responsibility of each Muslim to ease the economic hardship of others and strive toward eliminating inequality. Zakat consists of spending a portion of one's resources for the benefit of the poor or needy. A Muslim also may donate more as an act of voluntary charity rather than to achieve divine reward. Among the principles that are followed when giving the Zakat, payment may be in kind, that is, if one is wealthy, he or she needs to pay a portion of their income. But persons who are not wealthy should compensate for it in different ways such as by performing good deeds toward others. However, Zakat, as we shall see, is not the only key principle of Islam. There are many Islamic moral values which closely align with humanist moral values.

Islam's Universal Values. "Islam endorses certain universal values that need to shape our modern ethical frameworks and perception of the law. Universal here refers to overarching and general values and concepts that the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet endorse for all human beings, and not particularly for Muslims, regardless of their color, race, gender, and religion..... The four values become not only a system of laws, but a religious, moral, legal, individual and societal obligation."

Dignity of the Human Being This value pertains to all humans regardless of their beliefs, religion, race or origin. "This dignity is manifested by certain capacities foremost among them are reason and free-will. Dignifying humankind requires the respect and protection of the well-being and the free choice of the individual." (Qur'an, 18:29)

Pluralism and Toleration of Diversity "Another universal value of Islam is the equal origin of all humans, regardless of their color, race or ethnicity....The recognition of diversity goes beyond mere forbearance or resignation, it allows for mutual acceptance, toleration and appreciation of difference."

Justice and Excellence “Like human dignity, it (justice) is a universal, irreducible value that applies to everyone. Justice implies diversity of sides, differing views, and thus requires impartiality.”

Individual and Public Liberties “Individual rights include security of life and property, protection of honor and dignity, sanctity and security of private life against state violation, security of personal freedoms, protection of religious sentiments, and equality of all Muslims and non-Muslims before the law. Political rights comprise the right to protest against tyranny, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of conscience and conviction, protection from arbitrary imprisonment, and the right to participate in public life. Socio-economic rights entail the right to the basic necessities of life (food, shelter, clothing, education). Source: “Islam with a Heart” -- Dr. Emad Shahin (emadshahin.com/?p=1415)

Others, of course, have described the importance of moral values in people’s lives. Two brief examples:

--“In addition to honesty, you also need to incorporate the moral value of compassion into your life. Compassion allows you to have sympathy for the misfortunes of other people. It also motivates you to want to give them any type of assistance that you can. Compassion results in your having feelings of mercy towards other people. When you have compassion as a moral value people are more likely to put their trust in you because you will be non-judgmental of their circumstances.” Source: Moral Values in Islam -- Danyal Dareshani (http://www.academia.edu/3216145/Moral_Values_in_Islam)

-- Humanists strive to embrace the moral principle in the Golden Rule, the ethic of reciprocity, and treat each other as one would like to be treated themselves -- with tolerance, consideration and compassion. The Golden Rule, a unifying humanistic principle, cannot be claimed for any one philosophy or religion. Throughout the ages, many traditions have promoted one or other versions of it. In Islam, the Golden Rule is: “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.” -- The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith

The Key Principles of Humanism

There are numerous statements that express the principles of humanism that include the concept of responsibility, the “first cousin” as it were of the concept of charity. Here are several examples:

“Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.” -- Exploring the Idea of Humanism (<http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism>)

“Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept

supernatural views of reality.” -- What is humanism?
(<http://commonsensehumanism.blogspot.com/p/what-is-humanism.html>)

“Humanism aspires to the greater good of humanity. Despite the fact we have every intention of living life to the fullest, we don’t live our lives in a hedonistic fashion. Yes, we are individuals, but we also recognize our responsibilities to our fellow humans. We are progressive. We want to make things better. We believe we have the ability to make things better and that we have a responsibility to do so. We choose to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment and are committed to doing so in a way that not only helps ourselves, but helps others as well.”
-- From the “6 Elements of Humanism” by Jennifer Hancock, author of *The Humanist Approach to Happiness: Practical Wisdom* and *Jen Hancock’s Handy Humanism Handbook*.

We also suggest that you go to the sources noted below for a more complete presentation of the key principles of humanism. The principles, to be sure, cover a wide array of humanist concerns. We have drawn from several statements.

From Humanist Manifesto I (1933)

-- In place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer, the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.

--The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good.

(http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_I)

From Humanist Manifesto II (1973)

-- From the Preface: “Humanism is an ethical process through which we all can move, above and beyond the divisive particulars, heroic personalities, dogmatic creeds, and ritual customs of past religions or their mere negation.”

-- From the Closing: “We will survive and prosper only in a world of shared humane values.... At the present juncture of history, commitment to all humankind is the highest commitment of which we are capable.” (http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II)

From Humanist Manifesto III: Humanism and Its Aspirations (2003)

“....Thus engaged in the flow of life, we aspire to this vision with the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. The responsibility for our lives and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone.”

(http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III)

From the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 (International Humanist and Ethical Union)

-- Humanism is a lifeway aiming at the maximum possible fulfillment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

(<http://iheu.org/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>)

From “What Is Humanism?” by Fred Edwords

Former AHA Executive Director and currently the director of the United Coalition of Reason, Fred Edwords has written prolifically about the principles of humanism. In an essay on *What Is Humanism?* he concludes with a keen observation: “So, with modern humanism one finds a lifestance or worldview that is in tune with modern knowledge; is inspiring, socially conscious, and personally meaningful. It is not only the thinking person's outlook but that of the feeling person as well, for it has inspired the arts as much as it has the sciences; philanthropy as much as critique. And even in critique it is tolerant, defending the rights of all people to choose other ways, to speak and to write freely, to live their lives according to their own lights. So the choice is yours. Are you a humanist? You needn't answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ For it isn't an either-or proposition. Humanism is yours -- to adopt or to simply draw from. You may take a little or a lot, sip from the cup or drink it to the dregs. It's up to you.”

(http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/What_is_Humanism)

Helen Bennett provides her personal view in her poem “What Humanism Means to Me” in her book, *Humanism, What's That? A Book for Curious Kids* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2005).

Humanism means to me
I've got the opportunity
To realize that I am free
To take responsibility.

To me, it doesn't seem so odd
That many people pray to God
Whenever they are feeling low --
It's just the way they have to go.

But when I do not know the way
I do not feel the need to pray.
I use my brain to figure out
What the problem's all about.

I'm grateful that I have my eyes
To see the beauty of the skies,
I'm glad I have my ears to hear
The voices of my friends so dear.

But best of all, my brains the one
That figures out what must be done
To help me run a better race,
To make the world a better place.

For additional essays on Living the Humanist Life, Humanism and Traditional Religion and related issues, see: http://americanhumanist.org/Who_We_Are/About_Humanism

Islam and Humanism: On Common Ground

“Some modern Muslim scholars argue that the core values emphasized by humanism, such as the dignity of each human being, individual liberty, freedom of choice consistent with the collective good, participatory democracy, human rights, social justice, and rational inquiry, are all compatible with the Islamic worldview these scholars share humanism's quest for a more humane, just, and compassionate society.” -- Humanism and Islam (<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e892>)

The Three Major Tenants of Humanism in Islam

-- **Singularity of Humanity**. The first is the oneness of humanity. “Islam does not segregate between humans as per their origins, rather Islam regards all of them the same and from the same origin.... the fact that we all were created from the same thing makes us the same no matter wherever in this world we belong.”

-- **Human Dignity**. The second is the dignity of human beings. “Islam wants the humans to be dignified, which can only be possible when they fulfill their duties and achieve whatever is their right.... to live with dignity is another humanist aspect of Islam where Islam wants its followers to live in harmony with each other whilst fulfilling their rights and duties.”

-- **Justice**. The third is the establishment and practicing of justice. “...it is clear that establishment of justice is not the duty of government only, rather, it is the duty of every person that whenever and wherever they see injustice they should stand for it... when every human works towards establishment of justice, the ultimate result is the world becoming a better place for living.”

-- “Islam is a great proponent of humanism.... Primarily Islam wants the humans to establish justice and live with dignity and equality with each other to make the world a better place.”

Source: The Three Major Tenants of Humanism in Islam

(<http://beautifulquranquotes.jigsy.com/entries/islam/the-three-major-tenants-of-humanism-in-islam>)

Dr. Emad El-Din Shahin outlined the following five components which he termed “**Islam’s Humanist Legacy**”:

(1) The Value of the Human Being. Classical Islamic humanists view human beings as an accurate image of God capable of reaching perfection and acquiring the highest ethical values. Ibn Miskawayh, (932 – 1030 -- a philosopher and historian from Iran) expected a refined individual to possess certain positive ethical virtues: moderation, justice, wisdom, tactfulness, generosity, nobility, and courtesy.

(2) **Cosmopolitanism and the Unity of Humanity.** Muslim humanists believe in the unity and common destiny of humankind. They were driven by a genuine cosmopolitan spirit that reflected their love for humanity.

(3) **The Attainment of Happiness.** Influenced by Greek philosophy, Muslim intellectuals write extensively on the nature of happiness and the means of achieving it.

(4) **The Value of Knowledge and Reason.** Muslim thinkers view humans as rational beings capable of attaining happiness through knowledge, reason and education, and global cooperation.

(5) **Cooperation of Humanity to Achieve Happiness.** Muslim humanists hope to promote cooperation among humankind as the best way to achieve collective happiness. Ibn Miskawayh believed that the attainment of human perfection was only possible through mutual cooperation.

Dr. Shahin concluded that all of these features strongly impacted Islamic culture and continue to influence the intellectual formulations of later Muslim reformers. Source: Islam with a Heart (<http://emadshahin.com/?p=1415>) Dr. Shahin is professor of public policy at the American University in Cairo's school of global affairs and public policy.

Dr. John L. Esposito, professor of International Affairs and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University, wrote in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (2003) that “Some modern Muslim scholars argue that the core values emphasized by humanism, such as the dignity of each human being, individual liberty, freedom of choice consistent with the collective good, participatory democracy, human rights, social justice, and rational inquiry, are all compatible with the Islamic worldview.”

Progressive Islam. Humanism is not only a perspective of Islam in the past, it is “alive and well” today in the form of Progressive Islam as described below.

“At the heart of a progressive Muslim interpretation is a simple yet radical idea: every human individual, female or male, Muslim or non-Muslim, rich or poor, northerner or southerner, has exactly the same intrinsic worth.... A progressive Muslim is one who is committed to the strangely controversial idea that the true measure of a human being’s worth is a person’s character, and not the oil under their soil or their particular flag. A progressive Muslim agenda is concerned with the ramifications of the premise that all members of the human race have this same intrinsic worth....This identification with the full humanity of all human beings amounts to nothing short of an Islamic Humanism.

“An increasing number of those who advocate such a humanistic framework within the context of Islam have self-labeled themselves progressive Muslims. ‘Progressive’ refers to a relentless striving towards a universal notion of justice in which no single community’s prosperity, righteousness, and dignity come at the expense of another’s. Adherents of progressive Islam

conceive of a way of being Muslim that engages and affirms the humanity of all human beings, that actively holds all of us responsible for a fair and just distribution of our God-given natural resources, and that seeks to live in harmony with the natural world.”

Source: Omid Safi; *What is Progressive Islam?*
(jsrforum.lib.virginia.edu/pdfs/SafiProgressive.pdf)

Recommended reading on Islamic humanism

Islamic Humanism by Lenn E. Goodman, Oxford University Press, 2003. This book explains how, in the face of increasing religious authoritarianism in Islam, some Muslim thinkers continued to pursue essentially humanistic, rational, and scientific discourses in the quest for knowledge, meaning, and values. Drawing on a wide range of Islamic writings, from history to philosophical theology, the author shows that early Islam was open to individualism, occasional secularism, skepticism, even liberalism.

In many ways, we are on “the same page” as you will see in the following quotes, first from the Islamic perspective and then the humanist.

We Are On The Same Page

“It feels like this life is not my life. It’s a second life. People have prayed to God to spare me and I was spared for a reason—to use my life for helping people.” Malala Yousafzai, winner of the Noble Peace prize -- 2014

“Give charity for it’s like a flowing river, you can only gain from its clean water.”
“Invite to Islam” (<http://invitetoislam.tumblr.com/post/45926071522/give-charity-for-its-like-a-flowing-river-you>)

“We believe that poverty does not belong in a civilized human society. It belongs in museums A poverty-free world might not be perfect, but it would be the best approximation of the ideal.” -- Muhammad Yunus, 2006 Nobel Peace Prize Winner.

“The first person who benefits from an act of charity is the benefactor himself, by seeing changes in himself and in his manners, by finding peace, by watching a smile form on the lips an another person.” – Aaidh ibn Abdullah al-Qarhi is a Saudi Islamic Muslim scholar and author

“Smiling in your brother’s face is an act of charity.
So is enjoining good and forbidding evil,
giving directions to the lost traveler,
aiding the blind and
removing obstacles from the path.”
-- Cited by Ibn Hajar and al-Albani: *Hidaayat-ur-Ruwaah*, 2/293

“Commit yourself to good conduct both inwardly and outwardly; for whenever one transgresses the bounds of conduct outwardly, he is punished outwardly, and whenever one

transgresses the bounds of conduct inwardly, he is punished inwardly.” – Aisha was one of Muhammad's wives; her father, Abu Bakr, became the first caliph to succeed Muhammad.

“Humanism is the only -- I would go so far as saying the final -- resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history.”

— Edward W. Said was a Palestinian literary scholar and University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University.

“Our responsibility is to do what we can, learn what we can, improve the solutions, and pass them on.” – Richard Feynman, American physicist best known for his work in quantum mechanics.

“Love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust.”
-- Bell Hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love*

“One’s philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And, the choices we make are ultimately our own responsibility.” -- Eleanor Roosevelt

“Humanists recognize that it is only when people feel free to think for themselves, using reason as their guide, that they are best capable of developing values that succeed in satisfying human needs and serving human interests.” -- Isaac Asimov, 1984 AHA Humanist of the Year. Isaac Asimov was an American author and professor of biochemistry at Boston University

“Humanism in the modern sense of the term is the view that whatever your ethical system, it derives from your best understanding of human nature and the human condition in the real world. This means that it does not, in its thinking about the good and about our responsibilities to ourselves and one another, premise putative data from astrology, fairy tales, supernaturalistic beliefs, animism, polytheism, or any other inheritances from the ages of humankind's remote and more ignorant past.” -- A.C. Grayling, *Against All Gods: Six Polemics on Religion and an Essay on Kindness*

“Humanism is, in sum, a philosophy of those in love with life. Humanists take responsibility for their own lives and relish the adventure of being part of new discoveries, seeking new knowledge, exploring new options. Instead of finding solace in prefabricated answers to the great questions of life, Humanists enjoy the open-endedness of a quest and the freedom of discovery that this entails.” --The Humanist Association of Los Angeles
(<http://www.hala.org/Humanism-joyous-alternative.html>)

Islamic Non-theism. “In the discussion of knowledge, an important question arises as to how one can overcome his doubts regarding certain doctrines about God, the universe, and man. It is generally believed that in Islam, as far as belief is concerned, there is no place for doubting and

questioning the existence of God, the prophethood of Hadrat Muhammad and the Divine injunctions, that Islam requires unequivocal submission to its dictates. This general belief is a misconception there is room for doubt and skepticism in Islam”

-- From “The Islamic Concept of Knowledge” -- Dr. Sayyid Wahid Akhtar. Dr. Akhtar was an Urdu poet, writer, critic, orator, Muslim scholar and philosopher
(<http://www.alseraj.net/maktaba/kotob/english/Miscellaneousbooks/Al-Tawhidmagazin/html/eng/books/al-tawhid/islam-know-conc.htm>)

An interesting and highly relevant footnote is the 2008 finding of the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life. The study indicated that 42% of the Muslim population in the United States believes that “God is an Impersonal Force” and 5% do not hold a belief in God at all. By our account, a conservative estimate is that there are as many as one million Muslims in the United States who hold a non-traditional belief in God and as many as 130,000 Muslims who live without a god. You surely would not be alone in adding the humanist identity to your beliefs. Many Muslims realize that they have a home in humanism. We welcome you!

What Is The Next Step?

Humanism As the Next Step by Lloyd and Mary Morain (the Humanist Press, Washington, DC, new revised edition 2008) presents a concise overview of the history and principles of modern humanism. We also suggest that you begin to dialogue with humanists in your area on the core issues discussed above and look for additional commonalities which you are certain to find.

Also, if you harbor any doubts about the concept of a divinity (as many do according to the Pew Forum’s data noted above), the next step would be to explore the American Humanist Association’s website (americanhumanist.org/) where you will find a wealth of information about humanism, our local groups, programs, publications and resources of all types for people of all ages. You can, of course, follow the American Humanist Association on Facebook and Twitter and become a member of the AHA. Perhaps you may wish to identify yourself as both a humanist and a Muslim. You surely would not be the first to do so!

For additional information and for answers to any questions you might have about the humanist worldview and lifestance, please contact us at: aha@americanhumanist.org

A Final Word. The Islam concept of Zakat resonates closely with humanism. As we have repeatedly noted, Zakat is one of the central principles of Islam. Whether we call it “charity” or “responsibility” we are, indeed, on common ground. Let both concepts – charity and responsibility -- be the meeting place of the Islamic and humanistic lifestance.

