

“The extinction of race consciousness as between Muslims is one of the outstanding achievements of Islam, and in the contemporary world there is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue.”

(A.J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*,
New York, 1948, p. 205)



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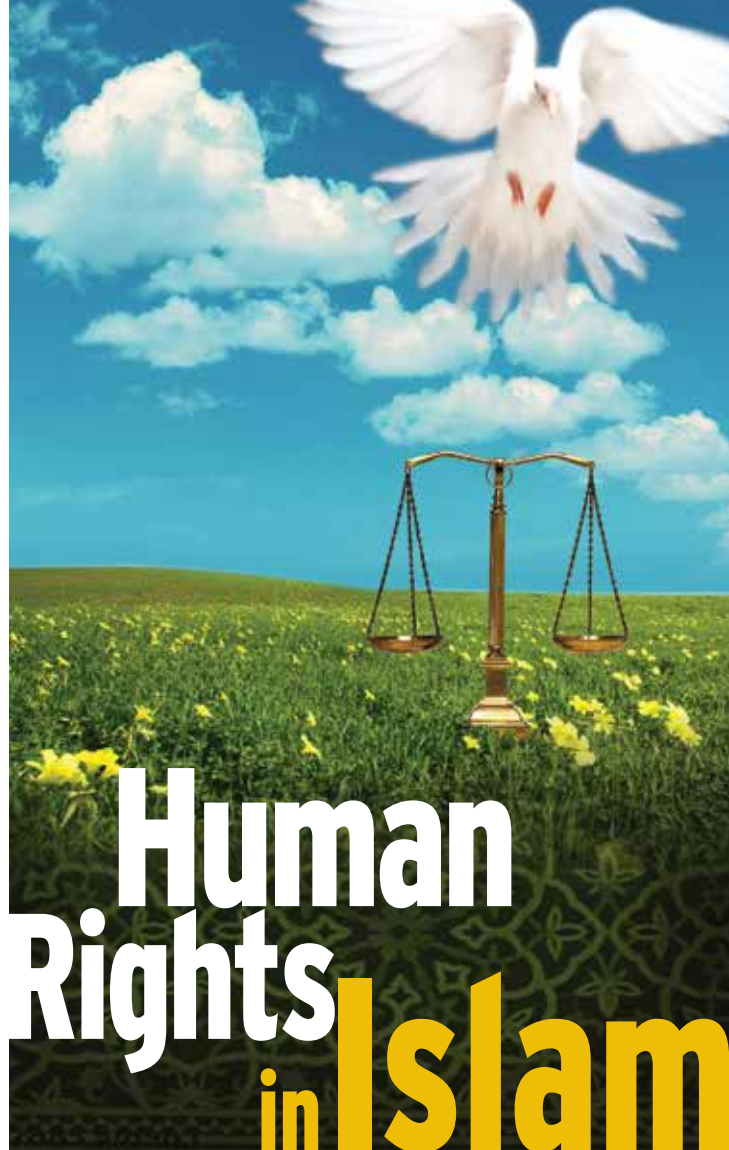
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Human Rights in Islam

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In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

“People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware.” (Quran 49:13)

We live in an age that is striking in its unprecedented technological sophistication. Unfortunately, the prejudices and inequities that have plagued the human race historically continue to exist, and are responsible for untold human suffering. It is in this context that the subject of human rights is especially pertinent. This brochure explains the origins of human rights in Islam, detailing the comprehensive and progressive entitlements Islam advocates on various issues afflicting the world today.

What constitutes human rights? Can we come to a common understanding of these liberties and thereby ensure that these are universally granted to every member of society? These questions have been the subject of historic documents such as the Magna Carta, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, the American Bill of Rights and the Geneva Convention.

What is often overlooked, however, is that these questions have also been addressed by various religious traditions. The Islamic model of human rights in particular is striking in its rigor, its vision and its relevance to modern times. The distinguishing feature of human entitlements in Islam is that they are the natural outcome of a broader practice of faith, deeds and social behavior that Muslims believe are divinely mandated. The Quran, the holy book of Islam, says:

God commands justice, doing good, and generosity towards relatives and He forbids what is shameful, blameworthy, and oppressive. He teaches you, so that you may take heed. (Quran 16:90)

Muhammad^P, the final prophet of Islam, established the very first Islamic society which eliminated the spiritual and social problems rampant in the Arabian Peninsula.

Freedom of religion was instituted in Medina; women were honored and respected as equals; racial discrimination was practically eliminated; tribal warfare was replaced with united ties of brotherhood; usury and alcohol were completely forbidden. As Karen Armstrong, a renowned author of books on comparative religion, has expressed, “Muhammad ... was a dazzling success, politically as well as spiritually, and Islam went from strength to strength to strength.”

Islam’s contribution to human rights is best appreciated when viewed against the backdrop of world history as well as the realities of modern times. Social, racial, gender, and religious inequities continue to exist. Economic and social disparities have resulted in oppression of the lower classes; racial prejudices have been the cause of subjugation and enslavement of people with darker skin; women have been weighed down by chauvinistic attitudes, and pervasive attitudes of religious superiority have led to widespread persecution of people with different beliefs.

When considering the question of human rights and Islam, it is important to distinguish the divinely prescribed rights of Islam from potential misinterpretation and misapplication by imperfect human beings. Just as Western societies still fight against racism and discrimination, many Muslim societies struggle to fully implement the rights outlined in Islam.

Human rights in Islam stem from two foundational principles: dignity and equality. Dignity is a fundamental right of every human being merely by virtue of his or her humanity. As God states in the Quran, “We have honored the children of Adam and carried them by land and sea; We have

Dignity and Equality

provided good sustenance for them and favored them specially above many of those We have created” (Quran 17:70).

Regarding equality, God (Allah in Arabic) clearly declares that in His sight, the only distinguishing factors between humans are righteousness and piety: *“People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware” (Quran 49:13).*

The diversity of humanity into many races and ethnicities is a testament to God’s majesty and wisdom. Therefore, racial superiority and discrimination is prohibited in Islam and contradicts its essence. This concept is exemplified in the final sermon of Prophet Muhammad^p who proclaimed:

No Arab has any superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab. Nor does a white man have any superiority over a black man, or the black man any superiority over the white man. You are all the children of Adam, and Adam was created from clay.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS

So many of the human rights violations are committed against women in this world. Under the laws of Islam, women have the right to own property and businesses, engage in financial transactions, vote, receive inheritance, obtain an education and participate in legal and political affairs. The fact that some Muslim societies do not always accord women all these liberties is an example of how human beings can fall short of fully implementing the Divine Will.

Both men and women have responsibilities towards their families and societies as is clear from the following verse: *“The Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoy what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His*

Messenger. On them will Allah pour His mercy: for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise” (Quran 9:71).

God promises in the Quran, *“If any do deeds of righteousness – be they male or female – and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them” (Quran 4:124).*

THE BIRTHRIGHTS OF LIFE AND SECURITY

In Islam, life is a sacred trust from God and the most basic right of a human being. No individual is permitted to take the life of another, unless it is for justice administered by a competent court following due process of law.

God recognizes this right in the Quran, *“Nor take life - which Allah has made sacred – except for just cause” (Quran 17:33).* He also says, *“...if anyone kills a person – unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land – it is as if he kills all mankind while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind” (Quran 5:32).*

Not only do human beings have the right not to be harmed, they have the right to be safeguarded from harm, physical or otherwise. For instance, under Islamic law, people are legally liable for not preventing a blind man from dying of a perilous fall, if they were in a position to save him.

Even during war, Islam enjoins that one deals with the enemy nobly on the battlefield. Enemy soldiers and prisoners of war are not to be tortured or mutilated under any circumstances. Islam has also drawn a clear line of distinction between combatants and non-combatants. As far as the non-combatant population is concerned, such as women, children and the elderly, etc., the instructions of Prophet Muhammad^p are as follows: *“Do not kill any old person, any child or any woman”* and *“Do not kill the monks in monasteries.”* Hence, non-combatants are guaranteed security of life even if their nation is at war with an Islamic state.

FREEDOM OF BELIEF

Contrary to popular misconceptions, a genuine Islamic republic is obligated to not only permit but respect diversity.

Thus, non-Muslims within an Islamic territory are allowed to worship in accordance with their religion. There are many examples of this historically.

When Muslims began ruling Palestine in 637 C.E., they invited the Jewish people to live in Jerusalem after 500 years of exile. In 1187 C.E., after retaking Palestine from the Crusaders, Muslims treated Christians with honor despite the brutality they had endured at the hands of the Crusaders. Christians were allowed to leave in peace or to stay in harmony.

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While Spain was under Muslim rule, the city of Cordova was considered the intellectual center of Europe, where students went to study philosophy, science and medicine under Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars. This rich and sophisticated society took a tolerant view towards other faiths, while peaceful coexistence was unheard of in the rest of Europe. The historian James Burke mentions in his book, *The Day the Universe Changed*, that thousands of Jews and Christians lived in safety and harmony with their Muslim overlords in Muslim Spain.

THE RIGHT TO A BASIC STANDARD OF LIFE

A basic standard of life includes the minimum essentials necessary for survival, such as food, clothing, shelter and medical attention. Anyone deprived of these necessities is entitled to receive aid in order to meet their needs. It is the duty of every Muslim with adequate means to give from their wealth, in order to eradicate poverty from society.

Describing the righteous believers in the Quran, God reminds that they are those who give a *“rightful share of their wealth to the beggar and the deprived” (Quran 51:19).* The Islamic state is also obligated to spend from its treasury to support the poor and disadvantaged.

THE ENTITLEMENT TO JUSTICE

Islam requires that Muslims possess upright character and deal justly with the entire human race, irrespective of their ethnicity, nationality, creed and whether they are a friend or foe.

God says in the Quran, *“You who believe, be steadfast in your devotion to God and bear witness impartially: do not let hatred of others lead you away from justice, but adhere to justice, for that is closer to awareness of God. Be mindful of God: God is well aware of all that you do” (Quran 5:8).*

Reflecting on the concept of justice in Islam, Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India, stated in a speech, *“The sense of justice that Islam encompasses is one of the most wonderful ideals of Islam, because, as I read in the Qur’an, I find those dynamic principles of life, not mystic but practical ethics for the daily conduct of life suited to the whole world.”*

RIGHTS AND MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that Islamic law has divinely mandated rights for individuals in their specific roles as spouse, parent, child, relative, neighbor, friend and even foe. In its distribution of rights and responsibilities, Islam has addressed the social, racial, gender, and sectarian issues plaguing our global society. Indeed, the model of rights and mutual responsibilities enshrined in Islam has a tremendous potential for individual and social reform in the world.

Note: The superscript “^p” next to Prophet Muhammad^p represents the invocation Muslims say with his name:

May God’s peace and blessings be upon him.