

Muslim, My Neighbor – Part 1

Human Rights

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** adopted by the United Nations in 1948 guarantees freedom of religion (the right to declare one's faith or religious affiliation), Article 18:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief, as well as the freedom to express one's religion or belief—alone or in community with others, publicly or privately—through teaching, practice, and worship."

Most Western countries have enshrined freedom of religion in their fundamental laws. The unrestricted practice and performance of religious rituals is guaranteed. Every individual has the right to religious freedom, meaning no one should be forced to act against their conscience or will regarding religion. Human dignity forms the foundation of this right.

The Qur'an states: "LA IKRAHE FIDDINI" (Al-Baqara 2:256), which translates to: *"There is no compulsion in religion."*

The basis for ensuring tolerance in Islamic teachings and law is the divine law. Part of this includes aspects of Sharia that regulate the rights and obligations of non-Muslim minorities within an Islamic state. Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians (a Persian religion with pre-Islamic roots), and others are subject to this command of tolerance. They have full freedom to carry out their religious ceremonies, rituals, and festivals.

Key Facts

- Islam emphasizes **justice, mercy, kindness toward others, and support for the weak.**
- The Qur'an and Hadith encourage **learning, knowledge, and rational thinking.**

- Islam promotes care for the poor through **Zakat** (obligatory alms) and **Sadaqah** (voluntary charity).
- **Respect** for parents, neighbors, guests, and the community is deeply ingrained.
- Islam strongly encourages the preservation of life and dignity and prohibits **discrimination based on race or ethnicity**. The Prophet's farewell sermon famously stated: *"No Arab has superiority over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab over an Arab, except by piety."*
- Emphasis is placed on **moral responsibility, ethics, honesty in trade, contracts, and work**.

OVERVIEW: Historical Contributions of Islamic Civilization

1. Science and Philosophy

During the Golden Age of Islam (8th–13th centuries), Muslim scholars advanced:

- Mathematics (algebra, Arabic numerals)
- Astronomy (first star charts, astronomical instruments)
- Physics and optics (Ibn al-Haytham)
- Medicine and surgery (Avicenna—Ibn Sina, Al-Zahrawi)
- Chemistry (alchemy → foundation of modern chemistry)

They also **translated and preserved ancient Greek philosophy** (Aristotle, Plato, Hippocrates), enabling the European Renaissance.

2. Medicine

Islamic physicians:

- Developed hospital systems (*bimaristans*)
- Introduced medical schools and practical exams
- Authored medical encyclopedias used in Europe until the 17th century

3. Mathematics

- Algebra (from *al-jabr*)
- Foundations of trigonometry
- Decimal number system

Without these contributions, modern computing and engineering would not exist as we know them today.

4. **Architecture**

Islamic architecture is known for:

- Geometric ornamentation
- Calligraphy
- Advanced construction of domes and arches

Examples: Alhambra (Spain), Sultan Ahmed Mosque (Istanbul)

5. **Art and Literature**

Development of calligraphy, poetry, and literature.

Famous poets: Rumi, Hafez, Omar Khayyam

6. **Geography and Navigation**

Muslim geographers and explorers mapped large parts of the globe (Ibn Battuta, Al-Idrisi), indirectly facilitating later European discoveries.

7. **Law and Society**

- Advanced legal principles
- Protection of minorities
- Regulation of marital and inheritance matters
- Emphasis on education (every major mosque had a school)

8. **Trade and Economy**

The Muslim world was an economic hub between East and West.

Innovations included:

- Checks (*sakk*)
- Credit and banking systems
- Extensive trade networks

9. **Tolerance and Coexistence**

In Andalusia (Spain), Muslims, Christians, and Jews collaborated for centuries in science, philosophy, and art.

Impact on the Modern World

Without Islamic civilization, modern mathematics, medicine, physics, navigation, philosophy, and banking would look very different today.

Islam emerged in the 6th century CE and today has approximately 1.9–2 billion followers. While present worldwide, it is most widespread in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia. From the 8th to the 13th centuries, Islam made significant contributions to world culture.

As one of the major world religions (second in number of followers), Islam is founded on values of **justice, mercy, honesty, and care for others**. Its sources strongly encourage the acquisition of knowledge, rational thinking, and social responsibility. Islam emphasizes respect for parents, neighbors, and the community, as well as universal equality regardless of race or origin. Institutions like Zakat and Sadaqah reflect care for the poor and social cohesion.

Historically, Islamic civilization left a deep mark on global culture and science. During the Golden Age, Muslim scholars advanced mathematics, astronomy, medicine, optics, and philosophy. By preserving and translating many classical Greek works, they contributed to the later European Renaissance. Developments in algebra, the decimal number system, hospital practices, and medical schools form the foundation of modern disciplines we often take for granted.

Islamic art and architecture were also distinguished by elegance and intricate geometric ornamentation, while the work of Islamic geographers and explorers led to more accurate maps and a better understanding of the world. In medieval Andalusia, Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived and created together, demonstrating that diverse traditions can enrich a common culture.

Modern mathematical, medical, philosophical, and economic systems owe much to this period of cultural advancement. For this reason, the heritage of Islamic civilization is rightly considered one of the key pillars of world heritage.

Principles of Islamic Justice

The first principle of Islamic justice is to **calm hatred, anger, and hostility** by protecting the rights of the righteous and innocent, transforming adversarial relations into harmony. The Qur'an instructs Muslims in conflict to turn to God and His Prophet for reconciliation (Beni Sadr, 1990:15–16). God commands all to promote justice and do good: *"God commands justice and doing good"* (Qur'an 16:90).

"If two groups of believers fight, reconcile them; but if one aggresses against the other, fight the aggressor until they follow God's law. Then reconcile impartially; God loves the just" (Qur'an 49:9).

Muslims are allowed to befriend non-Muslims who do not fight them: *"God does not forbid you to do good and act justly toward those who do not fight you for your religion and do not expel you from your homes. God loves the just"* (Qur'an 60).

According to the Qur'an, war is an **undesirable obligation** and must be conducted according to humane and moral guidelines. Those who initiate wars are considered disbelievers: *"...Whenever they kindle the fire of war, God extinguishes it. They roam the land causing corruption. God does not love corrupters"* (Qur'an 5:64). Muslims may only fight if attacked and when no alternative exists (Yahya, 2002:41–42). *"But if they cease, God is Forgiving, Most Merciful"* (Qur'an 2:192).

Islam is a **religion of peace and devotion to God**, valuing the inviolability of human life: *"Whoever kills an innocent person... it is as if they have killed all of humanity; and whoever saves a life, it is as if they have saved all of humanity"* (Qur'an 5:32). Islam condemns all forms of unjust violence. Acts of terror contradict the principles of Islam. The Qur'an forbids war during four sacred months and distinguishes between jihad and aggressive war (Qur'an 2:190, 2:217). Even in times of war, the stronger party must **respect human rights and call opponents to peace**.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

The Five Pillars form the **foundation of a Muslim's spiritual and moral life**, emphasizing individual responsibility to God, self, and community:

1. **Shahada (Declaration of Faith)** – Affirms belief in one God and the prophethood of Muhammad. Marks the start of the spiritual journey and commitment to Islamic ethics.
2. **Salat (Prayer)** – Five daily prayers teach discipline, gratitude, and spiritual focus, providing rhythm and reminding believers that spirituality is present in daily life.
3. **Zakat (Almsgiving)** – Obligatory charity promotes social justice and solidarity, supporting the poor and reducing inequality.
4. **Sawm (Fasting)** – Observed during Ramadan, develops self-control, empathy, and gratitude for God's blessings.
5. **Hajj (Pilgrimage to Mecca)** – Symbolizes unity among Muslims worldwide, gathering believers of all backgrounds in obedience to God.

Together, these pillars strengthen spirituality, morality, and humanity, fostering a strong sense of community and responsibility.

Considering all the evidence and insights presented, it is evident that Islam is fundamentally a religion of peace, rooted in justice, compassion, and respect for human dignity. Its teachings encourage knowledge, ethical conduct, and harmonious coexistence, making it a faith that deserves both understanding and respect in the modern world.

More to come...