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## Islamic humanism or humanistic Islam?

The article presents and analyses recent books by Muslim authors addressing the issue of humanism in Islam. After some general remarks about humanism and religion (in the current political context), idealist versus critical approaches to the theme of humanism and Islam will be identified. The bulk of the article is dedicated to an analysis of three books by Mouhanad Khorchide, a group of Norwegian reformists, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. After a brief consideration on how scriptures is dealt with in idealist and critical approaches, the article concludes with a distinction between “Islamic humanism” and “humanistic Islam”.

*Keywords:* Islam, humanism, reformism

In the European context, the buzzword “humanism” mostly brings positive associations. However, the term’s discursive alignment with secularism and even atheism makes it also controversial among believers (probably more so in the US context than in Europe).

The term humanism’s standing in Muslim majority societies is hard to generalize. In the present article, recent books on humanism by Muslim intellectuals and reformists

will be analyzed. Their humanist discourses are embedded in a European context but also draw on universal, Islamic resources.

This is not the place to attempt elaborate definitions of humanism, or its entanglement with current ethical and cultural discussions.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to mention that the term is typically associated with such values as the integrity of the individual, self-determination, rationality, free speech, liberal democracy, universalism, empathy (perhaps also solidarity), and non-violence. Increasingly, as the mentioned values indicate, humanism has also been associated (almost identified) with human rights.

### **HUMANISM, RELIGION AND POLITICS**

The relation between humanism and religion is constantly under discussion. Whereas some would identify humanism with irreligion, Corliss Lamont in his much-cited book *The Philosophy of Humanism* (first published in 1949) counts both Jesus, Confucius and Buddha among the forefathers of humanism: “Unquestionably the great religious leaders like Buddha and Confucius and Jesus have made a substantial contribution, on the ethical side, to the Humanist tradition.” (Lamont 1997: 53). In spite of widely recognized elements of “humanism” in classical Islam (see below), Muhammad is not on Corliss’ list.

In current discourses, there is also a tendency (at least in Europe) to align Humanism with “Christian values”. For instance after the 2012 constitutional amendments in

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive overview of contemporary, humanist themes and discourses, see Copson and Grayling (eds) 2015.

Norway the Constitution now reads (in article 2) that “Our values will remain our Christian and humanist heritage.” A nearly identical formula is found in the 2008 Education Act, reflecting a reference to “Christian and Humanist values” that was inserted in the general syllabus already in 1987.

In 1987, the formula “Christian and Humanist values” was probably meant as a historical reconciliation between Norwegian Christianity (in the broad cultural sense) and the (secular) Humanist Association which is relatively strong in Norway. But the formula can also – at least in its later, constitutional version – be read against the country’s religious pluralization and a felt need in the Norwegian populace (or polity) to reassert a historical identity associated with Christianity and Humanism. From that perspective, amendments in the Constitution and in the Education Act can also be seen as a tacit response to Islam which increasingly has made its presence felt in the same period.

### **ANALYZING HUMANISM AND ISLAM**

But how do Western Muslims respond to the pervasive – even defensive – discourse of (Christianity and) Humanism? Do they respond by criticizing humanism for being a Christian – or atheist – ideology? Or do we find Muslims who integrate the term in their own reasoning, as Muslim reformists and dialogue-oriented universalists?

In this article, I will first present and analyze the notion of humanism as used by (1) a group of Muslim intellectuals in Norway; (2) Mouhanad Khorchide of the Centre for Islamic Theology in Münster; and (3) the late reformist thinker Nasr Abu Zayd (d.

2010). After analyzing the three (groups of) authors, I will also make a small observation regarding humanism and the ambivalence of sacred scripture.

For a start, I will share some observations about what has been called “humanism in the renaissance of Islam” – that is, in the classical period of Islamic thought. I will distinguish between what I call idealistic and critical approaches – a distinction that will be introduced below and used throughout.

In the final analysis, I will discuss whether contemporary Islamic appropriations of Humanism” should be seen as instances of “Islamic Humanism” or “humanistic Islam”.

### **IDEALISTIC APPROACHES**

As regards the history of ideas, the expression “humanism in Islam”, or even “Islamic humanism”, has come to signify the renaissance of ideas associated with classical Greek philosophy and ethics, as appropriated by Arab intellectuals (Muslims and Christians alike) in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Mohammad Arkoun in his book from 1982 about the 10<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Miskawayh was probably the first to write about “Arab” (notably not “Islamic”) humanism in this way. Then in 1986, the Jewish scholar Joel Kraemer published a book about *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, implying that classical Islamic humanism by far predates both the European renaissance and Christian humanism.

This idealistic vision of a classical humanism in Islam, established by Western scholars in the 1980s, was followed up in 1990 by the American scholar George Makdisi in his

comparative work *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*. In 2003, Lenn Goodman followed suit in his book *Islamic Humanism*. In Goodman's idealistic view, the moral drive of the period was oriented towards virtue ethics and "the universal love of humankind as a single race, united by humanity itself". (Goodman 2003, 105)

The intellectual movement characterized as Islamic humanism was also a rare example of joint Muslim-Christian exploration of philosophy and ethics, in a common institutional framework (such as the "House of Wisdom" in 9<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad), provided by sympathetic caliphs and emirs.<sup>2</sup> In a joint intellectual effort sponsored by the Caliph, Muslim and Christian thinkers translated a vast part of the Greek philosophical heritage, including works of Plato and Aristotle, into Arabic. In this way they articulated not just one but two common languages: a Greek language of the mind and the written language of Arabic, demonstrating thus the ability to converse meaningfully across their different religious languages. Joel Kraemer notes that it was exactly in this period (in the 9<sup>th</sup> century) that Arabic language got a separate term for humanity – *insāniyya* (Kraemer 1986, 10).

Why did Muslim and Christian intellectuals make this common effort? In tune with the universalistic legacy of Greek philosophy, their central aim was to write works about virtue ethics in a philosophical language that transcended the boundaries of faith and articulated a common humanity. For instance, the main works of the Muslim philosopher Miskawayh (d. 1030) and his Christian mentor Yahya ibn 'Adi (d.

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<sup>2</sup> "The House of Wisdom" (*Bayt al-hikma*) was possibly initiated by Caliph Harun al-Rashid and culminating under Caliph al-Ma'mun who reigned from 813 to 833.

974) carry the same Greek-inspired title: “Refinement of the human character.” In the words of Miskawayh: “To this end people must love one another, for each one finds his own perfection in someone else, and the happiness of the latter is incomplete without the former.” (Miskawayh 1968, 14)

Earlier in the tenth century, al-Farabi wrote a work entitled “The virtuous city”, which on Platonic and Aristotelian models articulated a common political ethics. Humanity and joint polity was thus the common horizon of these philosophers, not Muslim or Christian group interest (Leirvik 2002, 122-142).

It was not (unfortunately, some would say) humanistic philosophy or its theological relative Mu‘tazilism that became the dominant line of thought within classical Islam. But the legacy has proved to be strong enough to serve as an inspiration for humanist-minded Muslim and Christian philosophers and theologians today.

### **CRITICAL APPROACHES**

The cited examples of how important trends in classical Islam have been re-read as early instances of humanism can be taken as *idealistic* projections of modern ideals into a classical period. But these projections may also function as a resource for a more *critical* form of Islamic humanism in the modern context.

The critical perspective on Islam and humanism reflects a shift in humanism’s ethical orientation. Whereas classical forms of “humanism” were typically oriented towards personal formation and human virtues, modern versions of Islamic humanism (such as the books by Bassam Tibi, Mouhanad Khorchide, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and a group of Norwegian Muslims to be dealt with below) typically take a much more

critical approach to ethics. Current Muslim writers identifying with the humanistic legacy sharply criticize any form of religious ethics that is seen as a menace to the integrity of the individual and a hindrance for humanity's progress. Instead of classical virtues (such as moderation and courage) it seems that human rights norms and values have now become the humanistic criterion. And in current discussion about the relation between religion and humanism, the implication is often that the religions are in need of a human-rights oriented "humanization".

The process-oriented idea that ethics and theology needs to be "humanized" can be found in the works of many contemporary Islamic reformists, for instance in an article by Bassam Tibi about "Islamic Humanism versus Islamism" (2012). In Tibi's reasoning, humanism is often blocked by a kind of "Sharia reasoning" which alienates Muslims from the rest of humanity. The alternative is a humanism that "humanizes the universe by dissociating it from the sacred." But discourses of a common humanity also endangered by "thinkers who see civilizational differences in the context of politicized religion" (Tibi 2012: 236, 239 – cf. the Norwegian conflation of Christianity and humanism). On the positive side, Tibi sees humanism as a concept of international morality based on cross-cultural and cross-civilizational grounds", which can also encompass "different grammars of humanism" based on diversity (Tibi 2012, 245-247).

### **THREE CONTEMPORARY CASES**

In what follows, I will highlight two recent books about humanism written in the European context, plus one book by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. I'm referring firstly to an anthology titled "Islamic humanism" (*Islamsk humanisme*, from 2016) which is

written by a group of reform-oriented Norwegian Muslims. The second book carries the title “God believes in the human being. With Islam towards a new humanism” (*Gott glaubt an den Menschen: Mit dem Islam zu einem neuen Humanismus*, from 2015). It is written by the director of the Centre for Islamic Theology at the University of Münster, Mouhanad Khorchide. The third book is a small book from 2004 by the reform thinker Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd which carries the title *Rethinking the Qur’ân: Towards a Humanistic Interpretation*.

### ***Islamsk humanisme (“Islamic Humanism”)***

As regards the book about Islamic humanism published by a group of Norwegian Muslims (academics and public intellectuals), it is interesting to note that the term humanism is only used in the preface and in one of the chapters (Farhan Shah: “Islamsk humanisme”). The other chapters<sup>3</sup> seem to take it for granted that issues such as individual freedom, anti-authoritarianism, gender equality, democracy, human rights etc. without further argument can be subsumed under the heading of “Islamic humanism”; testifying to the strong discursive power of the notion itself.

In general (as summarized by Farhan Shah), the book propounds “an Islam in harmony with the fundamental values in modern humanism, such as – for example – the human being’s self-determination and innate dignity, democratic activity, human rights, socio-political justice and an optimistic view of rationality and reason.” (Shah 2016, 33).<sup>4</sup> Historically, he notes that the classical philosophers (Muslim and

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<sup>3</sup> Written by Ali Chishti, Farhan A. Shah, Shoaib Sultan, Lena Larsen, Mohamed Abdi, Ellen Reiss, Nora S. Eggen, Umar Ashraf and Linda Noor respectively.

<sup>4</sup> My translation from Norwegian.



Christian) were inspired by the great Greek thinkers, when centering their works on “ethical individualism, the inviolability of the individual, and rationalism – that is, values that pointed towards modern human rights” (Shah 2016, 27).<sup>5</sup>

The human rights activist and convert to Islam Lena Larsen criticizes (in a similar vein as Tibi) Muslim attempts to circumscribe human rights conventions by referring to Sharia-based regulations which provide legitimacy to anti-humanist practices such as “discrimination of women and minorities, brutal forms of punishments and limited freedom of expression.” (Larsen 2016, 41)<sup>6</sup> It is also interesting to note how in this book, ethical normativity is anchored in lived experiences and modern sensibilities more than in Sharia: «Objections and critique cannot be refused by the argument that Sharia-based regulations are not subject to change. Modern human beings regard slavery and gender discrimination as unjust, they regard freedom of religion to be an innate right, and hold that cruel and denigrating punishments shall not be tolerated.” (Larsen 2016, 47)<sup>7</sup>

It strikes me that in this kind of reasoning, humanistic values function as non-negotiables, trumping the ethical or juristic tradition of Islam (or any other religion and life stance). The book’s critique, however, is primarily aimed against traditional perceptions and practices. The normative sources (especially the Qur’an) tend to be taken in the very best sense, sometimes implying that true Islam is inherently humanistic. It should be mentioned though that some of the contributors (Shah,

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<sup>5</sup> My translation from Norwegian.

<sup>6</sup> My translation from Norwegian.

<sup>7</sup> My translation from Norwegian.

Chishti) raise doubt – on humanist grounds – about the normative status of the hadith corpus.

***Mouhanad Khorchide***

The second book, written by Mouhanad Khorchide (*Gott glaubt an den Menschen: Mit dem Islam zu einem neuen Humanismus*) invokes the European humanist tradition in a project explicitly aimed at humanizing Islamic theology. His target audiences are the academic community but just as much (it would seem) the Islam debate in general society.

His book about Islam and humanism is written from within the context of the European university and indicates how Islamic university theology (Leirvik, 2016) in the European context is currently being reformulated in dialogue with dominant ethical and philosophical discourses in larger society. This becomes clear in another of Khorchide's books, "Sharia – the misunderstood God" (*Scharia – der missverstandene Gott*, 2013), which carries the programmatic subtitle «Der Weg zu einer modernen islamischen Ethik». Here, he makes it clear from the outset that he will not focus on the juristic aspects of Sharia but rather on its «ethical» and «spiritual» aspects (Khorchide 2013: 74f., cf. 95). He also mentions that in Münster, when a new professorship in Islamic law was about to be announced, they changed the title from Islamic law to «Science of norms and its methodology» («Normenlehre und deren Methodologie») to avoid a juristic understanding of Sharia and with the

positive aim of contributing to a general discussion of ethical norms in pluralistic societies (Khorchide 2013: 85).

As in the case of classical Islamic philosophy, the institutional aspect or “humanist” seems to make a critical difference: Humanism – and a general discussion of ethics – seem to require a certain freedom from established, Orthodox institutions and thrives better in “academies” and universities.

Khorchide’s main focus is on the humanistic legacy and its confrontation with inhumane traditions. The most central issue in this book is religion and violence, a theme that Khorchide (on behalf of the Muslim community) approaches in a highly self-critical way. He criticizes the apologetic argument that “violence has nothing to do with Islam” and cites a number of mainstream classical scholars in Islamic history who have actually articulated rather belligerent interpretations of the Qur’an (Khorchide 2015, 179–187).

Khorchide does not stop by ethics but criticizes theological conceptions as well. As in his book about divine mercy (*Islam ist Barmhertzigkeit*, 2012), he also criticizes violent images of perdition and of hell as a place of divine torture, taking instead such imagery as a symbolic expression of purification (Khorchide 2015, 197–200).

In his positive formulation of a liberating pedagogy and a non-violent humanism, Khorchide leans both on his reading of Islam as a religion of mercy and on relevant strands of European humanism, which are expounded at length. Islamic-religious and

European-philosophical tradition seem thus to carry equal weight as background material for his reflections on Islam's contribution to humanism today. For instance, he explains how the Islamic tradition about God's qualities (mirrored by the Qur'an) may be transposed to human ideals (individual as well as societal). The adjacent human attitude is to "open up" for these divine qualities and "break up" from inhuman, dictatorial authority structures (Khorchide 2015, 225-227).

### ***Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd***

In the works of Abu Zayd, the discourse of humanism turns up in his reformulation of a Qur'anic hermeneutics. The key term is "humanistic hermeneutics", as expressed in his *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (from 2004).<sup>8</sup>

The cited book from 2004 is more like a pamphlet. In what follows, I will try to let some other works of Abu Zayd further elucidate what he means by a humanistic interpretation of Islam's sacred Scripture.

Whereas the focus of the Norwegian Muslims and that of Khorchide is mainly ethical, Abu Zayd takes a broader approach and addresses also the relation between the human and the divine in qur'anic hermeneutics.<sup>9</sup>

To my understanding, Abu Zayd's hermeneutics is "humanistic" in a double sense.

First, like all modern reformists he aims at a *humanistic* reinterpretation of the

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<sup>8</sup> Based on the inaugural address of 27 May 2004 at the occasion of the acceptance of the Ibn Rushd chair of Humanism and Islam at the University for Humanistics in Utrecht.

<sup>9</sup> For the following, cf. Leirvik 2015.

Qur'an with regard to some critical ethical and political issues arising from the collision between tradition and modernity. In addition to the overarching question of how to overcome authoritarianism in religion and politics, he also highlights critical issues such as the abolition of slavery, equal citizenship for Christians and Muslims, and gender equal rules of inheritance. (Abu Zayd 1996, 96f, 170)

Secondly, he seeks to achieve a critical and constructive understanding of the *human* character of the Qur'an which allows for a radical "rethinking" of the holy text and its established discourse. According to Abu Zayd, the dynamic discourse of the Qur'an must be distinguished from what he terms "the religious discourse" which reduces "the living phenomenon" of the Qur'an "to be only a text" (Abu Zayd 2004, 62f.).

As for the text and its living discourse, he argues that the Qur'an has a human dimension in at least three senses: (1) Like any other text, it has its particular "discourse" related to the basic structures of the Arabic language through which it exercised its influence. (2) It came as a response to the need of the community in certain historical situations, and (3) it was edited and codified after the event of revelation. Above all, it is the Qur'an's dependency of "the domain of language" that expresses its human nature. "It is then not likely", he concludes, "to assume that the Qur'an presents literally and exclusively the word of God." (Abu Zayd 2001, 4)

Abu Zayd notes that in the everyday life of the early Islamic community, the Qur'an was never treated as a written text. It was rather recited, and listened to. This brings him to another aspect of the Qur'an's divine-and-human nature, namely the fact that

in prayer, the believer is both reciter and listener. Thus in prayer, a daily “semi-*wahy* situation”<sup>10</sup> arises, in which the believer is reciter and listener at the same time. (Abu Zayd 2001, 9, cf. 2008, 143)

The Qur’an, then, particularly through its recitation, constitutes an area of communication in which God and Man meets. Coming close to a concept of incarnation, Abu Zayd suggests that “Our human identity is divine as much as the Divine identity is humanized by our perception.” (Abu Zayd 1991, 15, cf. 2008, 157)

In a sum, Abu Zayd sees the Qur’an as “the outcome of dialoguing, debating, augmenting, accepting and rejecting. This horizontal, communicative and humanistic dimension is in the ‘structure’ of the Qur’ân, not outside it.” (Abu Zayd 2004, 63) He makes a similar point when in *Naqd al-khitāb al-dīnī* he quotes the famous saying of Imam ‘Ali: “The Qur’an is a recorded text between two book covers: It only talks when people speak by it.” (Abu Zayd 2007, 92/Abu Zaid 1996a, 85)<sup>11</sup>

Seen together, the two books by Norwegian Muslims and Mouhanad Khorchide have an ethical focus, combining idealistic and critical approaches to present-day challenges. Abu Zayd’s approach is different and could be said to offer a hermeneutic, epistemological backing of Islamic humanism. Critical ethical issues are clearly part of the drive also in Abu Zayd’s “rethinking” of the Qur’an. But his distinct

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<sup>10</sup> A situation resembling the position of receptivity resembling conventional associations of revelation.

<sup>11</sup> The saying is found in Sermon 124 of *Nahj ul-balāgha* (a collection of sermons, letters and sayings by Imam ‘Ali). As noted by Kermani, Abu Zayd quotes a slightly different version of the saying, recorded by al-Tabari (Kermani 1996, 9).

contribution lies rather in his project of an epistemological humanization of sacred scripture.

### **IDEALISM, CRITIQUE AND AMBIVALENT SCRIPTURE**

The sacred scriptures of Islam (the Qur'an, possibly also hadith) can hardly be characterized as "humanistic" in the modern, historical-critical sense. The same is true of the Jewish-Christian Bible. Nevertheless, just as much as classical Greek philosophy and other religious traditions (cf. Lamont) they may be considered (by the believer as well as the observer) as important elements of modern humanism's prehistory. However, as the proponents of Islamic humanism referred to in the present article fully recognize and amply exemplify, there are also points of collision between the sacred scriptures and modern humanism.

The idealist solution would be to highlight qur'anic verses and ahadith that conform with modern humanistic values, for instance humanism's inherent universalism, and leave the rest in silence. Muslim humanists may underpin their ethical universalism by a much quoted saying by Imam Ali<sup>12</sup> in which he admonishes the governor of Egypt to remember that his subjects are of two kinds but fundamentally equal: "either your brother in religion or one like you in creation (*fi-l khalq*, often translated as 'in humanity')." <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Imam Ali was the fourth caliph (from 656 to 661) and is regarded as the rightful successor to Muhammad by Shia Muslims.

<sup>13</sup> Document of instruction in *Nahj al-balāgha* (Letter no. 53), to the governor of Egypt: "Habituate your heart to mercy for the subjects and to affection and kindness for them. Do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them, since they are of two kinds, either your brother in religion or one like you in creation [*fi-l khalq*, often translated as «in humanity»]. They will commit slips and encounter mistakes. They may act wrongly, willfully or by neglect. So, extend to them your forgiveness and pardon, in the same way as you would like Allah to extend His forgiveness and pardon to you ...". For a "humanistic", dialogical

Other sayings attributed to Imam Ali or Prophet Muhammad – or qur’anic verses – are more ambiguous with regard to humanistic values such as universalism and non-violence. I will briefly illustrate this by two sayings (one from the hadith, the other from the Qur’an) which are frequently quoted to illustrate universalistic and non-violent interpretations of Islam.

The first example is the Islamic rendering of the Golden Rule which interestingly comes in two versions in the Hadith collections – referring to one’s moral obligations towards one’s ‘brother’ (*akh*) and one’s ‘neighbor’ (*jār*) respectively.<sup>14</sup> In the famous Muslim dialogue initiative *A Common Word* (2007), the two versions are rendered side by side: ‘None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.’<sup>15</sup> And: ‘None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.’<sup>16</sup>

The hadith collector al-Bukhari seems not to be in doubt regarding the exact wording and renders only the version of the hadith using ‘brother’. In *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, another of the classical (Sunni) hadith collections, alternative versions that give preference to ‘neighbor’ and ‘brother’ respectively are quoted side by side (like in *A Common*

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appropriation of this particular saying, see for instance “A Person is Either Your Brother in Faith, or Your Equal in Humanity.” *Logic Central Online*, 28 October 2015.

<sup>14</sup> For the following (about Abu Zayd), see Leirvik 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Bukhārī n.d., *Kitāb al-īmān* (Book 2, Number 12). Unless otherwise stated, Hadith references in this article refer to the numbering found in the web versions of al-Bukhārī and Muslim published by the Center for Jewish–Muslim Engagement, University of Southern California.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Muslim n.d., *Kitāb al-īmān* (Book 001, Number 0072).



*Word*). When quoting the alternative versions, Muslim adds: “or perhaps he [Muhammad] said ‘for your neighbor/brother’” (*aw qāla ‘li-jārihi / akhihi*).

The version that reads ‘neighbor’ sounds more universalistic and less communitarian than ‘brother’, a term that is mostly used in hadith with reference to a *Muslim* brother in faith. From this perspective, it is interesting to note that in commonly used translations of hadith into English, a parenthesis emphasizing the communitarian meaning is added: “for your (Muslim) brother”.<sup>17</sup>

Variant versions of the Golden Rule in the world’s religion figure prominently in current discourses about ethics, religion and universalism. However, in transmission of the mentioned *ahadith* the ambiguity between communitarian and universalistic versions of the Golden Rule in Islamic tradition is not discussed – in spite of the apparent invitation from the hadith collectors to reflect critically on the relation between ethical obligation towards “neighbor” and “(Muslim) brother” respectively. This is also the case with the dialogue initiative *A Common Word*, in which both versions are quoted – without any discussion of the saying’s ambiguity.

Idealist silencing of problematic aspects of sacred scripture is a widespread, hermeneutic strategy applied by most religious traditions when trying to solve obvious tensions between tradition and human rights values. When it comes to non-violence – another pivotal element of modern humanism – a telling example is how

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<sup>17</sup> I’m referring to the translations by Mahmoud Matraji and M. Muhsin Khan.

Qur'an 5: 32 (a parallel to Sanhedrin 4: 5 in Jewish Mishna)<sup>18</sup> is commonly cited in discussions of Islam and violence: "Anyone who kills a person [...] then it is as if he has killed all the people. And whoever spares a life, then it is as if he has given life to all the people." In widespread citation practices, the following parenthetical sentence indicated above [...] is mostly left out: "for other than murder, or corruption in the land."

The verses that follows (in 5: 33-49, about *hudūd* ordinances) actually indicate that 5: 32 – in its literary context – is more about legitimate violence than non-violence. But that is mostly glossed over in idealist and dialogical discourses – for instance, in the recent joint declaration by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb published 4 February 2019: «Human fraternity for world peace and living together».

As we have seen, both Khorchide, Larsen, and Abu Zayd are quite realistic in their treatment of possible collisions between Islamic tradition and modern human rights. This does not impede an optimistic view of the humanist potentials of the Qur'an, the hadith and classical Islamic thought – formulated by Khorchide as a "new" humanism pointed out by Islam and by Shah as an "Islamic humanism".

## ISLAMIC HUMANISM OR HUMANISTIC ISLAM?

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<sup>18</sup> «... that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world.”  
([https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Sanhedrin.4.5](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sanhedrin.4.5))

In the cited authors, the notion of “humanism” signals an absolute obligation to human rights norms and a set of associated values such as equality between the sexes, equal treatment of different religions and convictions, personal freedom, humane punishments and non-violence. Interestingly, Khorchide does not call for an “Islamic” humanism (Khorchide 2015, 226). Instead, he seeks to reveal the Islamic sources’ potential for what he calls “a humanism for all”. There are clearly idealistic elements in his argument, for instance in his quite selective use of hadith to illustrate his humanistic vision of Islam. His approach is nevertheless *critical*. As noted, he abandons apologetic arguments such as “violence has nothing to do with Islam”, fully recognizing that violent interpretations of the normative sources are in fact possible.

Avoiding the idealistic notion of “Islamic humanism”, Khorchide propounds instead what I would term a “humanistic Islam”. Whereas the term “Islamic humanism” may be taken to imply that Islam is inherently humanistic, the expression “humanistic Islam” implicitly admits that humanism is but one out of several possible interpretations of the Islamic tradition.

The same distinction would of course apply to humanism in the Christian context. As a Christian theologian, I am skeptical towards the *idealistic* notion of a “Christian humanism”. I would instead advocate a “humanistic Christianity” which is *critically* aware that neither Christianity nor Islam is essentially humanistic. They may just as well stand forth as inhumane.

This terminological distinction implies that humanism can be seen as an overarching value system which the religions to a varying degree live up to. Only when realizing that both religions have also non-humanistic elements can Islam – or Christianity – be regarded as critical religion.

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