Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

Man or God: A Comparative Analysis of Islamic and Humanist Worldviews

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Article Details:

Received on 15 oct , 2025
Accepted on 15 Nov ,2025
Published on 23 Dec, 2025

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Abstract

This paper conducts a comprehensive and critical comparison of two contrasting worldviews: the **Islamic worldview** and **secular Humanism**. Framed by the question "Man or God," it examines how each tradition understands reality, knowledge, ethics, human purpose, and ultimate destiny. Islam is fundamentally **theocentric**, placing God at the centre of existence and deriving truth and morality from divine revelation. Secular Humanism is **anthropocentric**, centring meaning and value in humanity and grounding ethics in reason and human welfare. The research employs a qualitative comparative methodology that synthesizes primary texts (Qur'an, Hadith, and Humanist manifestos) and secondary scholarship to analyze their respective positions on metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, life purpose, and eschatology. The findings reveal stark divergences: Islam views the world as created and guided by Allah, sees revelation as a primary source of knowledge, grounds morality in divine command, and pursues happiness in relation to God and the afterlife. Humanism posits a self-existing natural universe, elevates reason and science as the sole arbiters of truth, locates morality in human empathy and social well-being, and seeks fulfillment in this life. However, there are also areas of convergence, such as shared values of compassion and justice. The discussion explores implications for contemporary moral debates, human rights, law, and inter- worldview dialogue. The paper concludes that understanding these worldviews enriches both interfaith engagement and secular–religious dialogue in a pluralistic world.

Keywords: Islamic worldview, Humanism, theocentrism, anthropocentrism, ethics, comparative philosophy.

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Journal of Social Signs Review

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Print ISSN 3006-466X

2 Introduction

2.1 Background and significance

A profound tension between religious and secular worldviews marks modern societies. In the post- Enlightenment West, the rise of science and rationalism fostered a secular outlook that often marginalised religious authority. This trend intensified into movements such as secular Humanism, which asserts that humans can and must create their own values and meaning without recourse to a deity. At the same time, religious traditions like Islam continue to inspire billions of people, offering comprehensive visions of reality anchored in divine revelation. These opposing worldviews are not merely academic constructs; they influence public policy, human rights discourse, educational curricula, and personal ethics. Misunderstandings between them sometimes lead to social conflict, as seen in debates over blasphemy laws, LGBTQ rights, gender roles, and the teaching of science.

Islamic scholars have articulated an integrated worldview (referred to as ruʾyah al- islamiyya) that encompasses metaphysical beliefs, epistemology, ethics, and social ideals (Perdana & Wahyudi, 2024). Similarly, proponents of Humanism have codified their vision in manifestos proclaiming the universe's self-existence and elevating human reason as the supreme authority (American Humanist Association, 1933). The stakes of comparing these systems are high: the way societies answer the question of whether God or Man occupies the centre of reality shapes their laws, values, and concepts of justice.

2.2 Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this study is to provide a balanced, scholarly comparison of Islamic and secular humanist worldviews. The objectives are to:

1.Elucidate the core tenets of the Islamic worldview, drawing on the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical and contemporary interpretations. This includes exploring beliefs about God, creation, human nature, knowledge, ethics, and the afterlife.

2.Trace the development of Humanism, from its roots in Greek thought through the Renaissance and Enlightenment to the modern secular humanist movement. Key documents, such as the Humanist Manifestos I and II, are examined for their claims about reality, reason, morality, and human purpose.

3.Compare and contrast the positions of Islam and Humanism on five fundamental dimensions: metaphysics (nature of reality and ultimate authority), epistemology (sources of knowledge), ethics (basis of morality), anthropology (nature and purpose of the human being), and eschatology (views of death and afterlife).

4.Discuss contemporary implications of these worldviews for legal systems, human rights, education, and social issues. The study also investigates areas where dialogue may be fruitful despite profound philosophical differences.

2.3 Research questions and hypotheses

Five research questions guide this comparative study:

1.Metaphysics: What is regarded as the ultimate reality and centre of value in Islam versus Humanism? Hypothesis: Islam is theocentric, affirming God as the creator and sustainer, whereas Humanism is naturalistic, asserting that the universe is self- existing and unguided (American Humanist Association, 1933).

2.Epistemology: How do these worldviews differ concerning the sources and validation of knowledge? Hypothesis: Islam prioritises divine revelation, supplemented by reason,

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Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

whereas Humanism considers human reason and empirical science sufficient for all knowledge claims (Perdana & Wahyudi, 2024).

3.Ethics: What grounds moral values and obligations? Hypothesis: Islam bases morality on God's commands and objective values revealed in scripture, while Humanism derives ethics from human experience and the promotion of wellbeing without reference to the supernatural (Lamont, 1990).

4.Purpose of life: What is the highest goal and meaning of human existence? Hypothesis: Islam teaches that the purpose of life is to worship Allah and prepare for eternal life (Qur'an 51:56), whereas Humanism defines meaning through self-realization and the pursuit of human flourishing in this life (American Humanist Association, 1933).

5.Afterlife: How do these worldviews view death and destiny? Hypothesis: Islam affirms an eternal afterlife with accountability and reward or punishment, while Humanism generally denies personal survival after death, emphasising legacy and memory (Lamont, 1990).

3 Literature review

3.1 Islamic theology and worldview

The Islamic worldview is rooted in the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, which together articulate a comprehensive vision of reality, knowledge, and ethics. Classical scholars such as al- Ghazalī (11th c.) argued that reason has a limited capacity and must be guided by revelation to reach the ultimate truth. The Qur'an presents God (Allah) as the absolute reality and describes creation as purposeful. Humans are designated as khalīfa (vicegerents) on earth, entrusted with stewardship and moral responsibility. The verse

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي ٱلْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوٓا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَن يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ ٱلدِّمَآءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ قَالَ إِنِّيٓ أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

"and [remember] when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed I will place upon the earth a vicegerent'" (Qur'an 2:30)

Underscores this status. Although humans enjoy honoured status, they are servants of God, obliged to adhere to divine guidance.

Islamic epistemology centres on wahy (revelation) as the primary source of knowledge. Reason and empirical observation are encouraged to reflect on the signs of creation, but are subordinate to revelation. Classical rationalists, such as Ibn Rushd (Averroes), maintained that reason and revelation cannot conflict because both are believed to originate from the same source, namely God. Modern Islamic thinkers, such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, have emphasized that secular science, detached from its metaphysical underpinnings, leads to an unbalanced worldview (Nasr, 1989). They argue that the decline of religious authority and the dominance of secular humanism have marginalised spirituality and moral absolutes.

Islamic ethics derive from divine command. The Sharīʿa provides specific prescriptions (halal vs. haram) believed to promote individual and social well-being. Morality is viewed as objective and immutable, grounded in God's wisdom. The concept of fitra, an innate disposition to recognise God and do good, complements revelation. However, human free will allows individuals to choose between obedience and sin, with consequences in this life and the hereafter.

The purpose of life in Islam is expressed clearly in the Qur'an:

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ

"I did not create jinn and mankind except to worship Me". (Qur'an 51:56).

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Journal of Social Signs Review

Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

Worship in Islam encompasses not only ritual acts but also ethical conduct, work, and family life when performed in accordance with God's will. The akhira (afterlife) is central to Islamic consciousness; earthly life is transient and serves as a test of one's faith. Ultimate justice and true happiness are realised in the hereafter, where individuals will be rewarded with Paradise or punished in Hell based on their deeds.

Contemporary Muslim scholars have critically engaged with humanism. Maududi and Qutb, for example, rejected secular ideologies that place human authority over divine authority. They argued that systems like secular democracy or socialism can be forms of modern Jahiliyya (ignorance) that usurp God's sovereignty. Others, such as Nasr, emphasize that the absolutization of humanity results in spiritual impoverishment and environmental crisis, because humans are not equipped to be the ultimate arbiters of value (Nasr, 1989).

3.2 Humanist philosophy and worldview

The roots of Humanism can be traced to ancient Greece. Protagoras's statement that "Man is the measure of all things" (Plato, trans. 2008, Theaetetus, 152a) signaled a shift toward human- centred relativism. Classical philosophers emphasised reason and human potential. Renaissance humanists, such as Petrarch and Pico della Mirandola, revived classical learning and celebrated the dignity and creative power of humans, albeit within a Christian context. Pico's Oration on the Dignity of Man acclaimed human beings as the marvel of creation, capable of shaping their own nature.

During the Enlightenment, humanists such as Voltaire and Kant further diminished the role of revealed religion. Kant's call "Sapere aude" ("Dare to know") urged people to rely on their own understanding and judgment. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the emergence of explicitly secular humanism. The Humanist Manifesto I (1933) declared that the universe is self- existing and not created and that humans are products of natural evolutionary processes (American Humanist Association, 1933). It asserted that religion must transform into a worldly faith centred on human values and reason. Humanist Manifesto II (1973) proclaimed, "No deity will save us; we must save ourselves," emphasizing self-reliance and rejecting supernatural salvation.

Humanist epistemology rests on the sufficiency of human reason and empirical science. Anything beyond the grasp of reason is regarded as non- existent or irrelevant. Corliss Lamont's The Philosophy of Humanism defines Humanism as a naturalistic philosophy that rejects all supernaturalism and is based on reason, science, democracy, and human compassion (Lamont, 1990). Humanists value the scientific method as the primary means of acquiring knowledge and dismiss revelation as subjective or unverified.

Humanist ethics are grounded in human experience, empathy, and the promotion of well-being. Moral values are considered human constructs that should evolve with social progress. Ethics are autonomous and situational, needing no theological sanction. Humanists advocate for individual autonomy, freedom of thought, equality, and social justice. They often emphasise rights such as freedom of speech, gender equality, and LGBTQ rights, viewing them as extensions of human dignity and happiness.

The purpose of life, in humanist thought, is self- development and the realisation of human potential. The 1933 manifesto states that the complete realization of human personality is the ultimate goal of human life, to be achieved in the present moment. Humanists encourage individuals to find meaning through creativity, love, community service, and the pursuit of knowledge. Because they generally deny the possibility of

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Print ISSN 3006-466X

personal survival after death, humanists emphasise living fully and ethically in this life and leaving a positive legacy. Lamont (1990) notes that humanists can face mortality without fear by focusing on the enduring impact of their actions and the natural cycle of life.

Critics of humanism, including religious scholars, contend that by rejecting God and divine guidance, humanism risks moral relativism and hubris. They argue that human reason alone cannot supply objective values or ultimate meaning. Nevertheless, humanists maintain that robust moral frameworks can emerge from reasoned reflection on human nature and social experience, without recourse to the supernatural.

4 Methodology

This study employs a comparative qualitative methodology that draws on textual analysis and conceptual comparison. Instead of collecting empirical data, it synthesises and contrasts authoritative texts from both traditions. Primary Islamic sources include the Qur'an (Arabic verses with translations) and canonical Hadith collections. For Humanism, primary texts include the Humanist Manifestos and writings of leading humanist thinkers such as Lamont. Secondary sources comprise scholarly analyses of Islamic and humanist thought, offering context and interpretation.

The comparison is structured around five components that characterise any worldview: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, anthropology, and eschatology. For each dimension, the researcher identifies representative statements and arguments from both worldviews, examines their underlying assumptions and reasons, and highlights points of agreement or divergence. The use of both historical and contemporary texts ensures that the comparison recognises internal diversity within each tradition.

A key limitation of this approach is that it does not account for empirical variations among actual followers. Not all Muslims or humanists strictly adhere to the idealised positions described here. Nonetheless, examining the core textual and philosophical arguments provides a valuable framework for understanding the foundational differences and potential areas of dialogue.

5 Findings/Results

5.1 Worldview core: theocentrism vs. anthropocentrism

The most fundamental difference lies in the centre of value. Islam affirms God's absolute sovereignty; the universe is created and sustained by Allah, and humans are servants and stewards. The doctrine of tawhīd, the oneness of God, forms the foundation of Islamic metaphysics. Every aspect of life is ordered in relation to God. Humans have dignity because they are created by Allah and entrusted with moral responsibility. Their worth is not intrinsic, but rather derived from their relationship with God.

Humanism, by contrast, places humans at the centre of meaning. It asserts that there is no supernatural creator and that the universe exists independently (American Humanist Association, 1933). Humans become the measure of all things, and human minds construct values. This anthropocentrism can take on a quasi-religious tone: some critics argue that humanism effectively "deifies" humanity (Perdana & Wahyudi, 2024). The notion of sacredness is associated with human autonomy, freedom, and potential, rather than with a divine being. This difference means that in Islam, all meaning is relative to God's will, whereas in Humanism, meaning is relative to human purposes.

5.2 Sources of knowledge: revelation and reason vs. reason and science

Islamic epistemology holds that divine revelation is the primary source of knowledge. The Qur'an is considered the literal word of God, guiding us to metaphysical truths, moral

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Online ISSN 3006-4651

Print ISSN 3006-466X

principles, and practical laws. Reason (`aql) and empirical observation are valued tools to understand creation and apply revelation, but they are never allowed to override the revealed text. As al- Ghazalī warned, unaided reason can mislead; actual knowledge comes from harmonising reason with revelation.

Secular Humanism, on the other hand, recognises human reason and the scientific method as the only credible sources of knowledge. The manifestos emphasise that religion must conform to the scientific spirit (American Humanist Association, 1933). Claims that cannot be verified through empirical evidence or logical analysis are deemed speculative or meaningless. This epistemic commitment leads humanists to reject miracles, prophecy, and supernatural explanations. For them, the progress of science from Copernicus and Newton to Darwin and Einstein demonstrates that human intellect is capable of unlocking the secrets of nature without appeal to revelation. Ethical beliefs are also subjected to rational scrutiny and revision.

5.3 Ethics: divine command vs. human- centred morality

Islamic ethics are grounded in divine command. Morality is objective and absolute because it is rooted in God's eternal wisdom. Practices such as prayer, fasting, charity, and the prohibition of certain acts (e.g., theft, adultery) are derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah. Obedience to God is the highest virtue; violating divine law constitutes sin. While reason can apprehend some moral truths through fitra, the final arbiter of right and wrong is revelation. The promise of reward and fear of punishment in the hereafter reinforce moral behaviour.

Humanist ethics are human- centred and often consequentialist or virtue- based. Moral values are deemed to arise from human needs, empathy, and social contracts rather than divine decrees. As Lamont (1990) explains, the "good life" is achieved by combining personal growth with work that benefits the community. Values such as freedom, equality, compassion, and justice are justified because they contribute to human well-being and promote a more equitable society. Humanists emphasise moral autonomy; individuals are encouraged to reason about ethical questions and revise their beliefs in light of new understanding. There is no ultimate external authority to appeal to—only human consensus and the evolving findings of science and philosophy.

5.4 Purpose and meaning of life: worship and hereafter vs. self- realisation in this life

For Muslims, the purpose of life is to worship Allah and to prepare for eternal life. Worship is understood broadly to encompass ritual devotion (such as prayer and fasting), moral conduct, seeking knowledge, and performing daily tasks with the right intention. Happiness is linked to obedience, spiritual growth, and hope for the joys of Paradise. Life is a test whose results determine one's status in the afterlife. Even suffering can be meaningful if it fosters patience and reliance on God. This teleological perspective invests every action with eternal significance.

For humanists, meaning is constructed in relation to human capacities and the relationships among individuals. The Humanist Manifestos assert that the goal of life is the full development of human personality and the enrichment of society in the present. Humanists find purpose in creative expression, intellectual exploration, love, friendship, and service to others. Because death marks the end of personal consciousness, humanists emphasise making a positive impact during one's lifetime. Legacy, memory, and contributions to collective progress become substitutes for eternal reward. Many

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humanists find awe and inspiration in the beauty of nature and the universe, experiencing a kind of secular spirituality that does not posit a supernatural being.

5.5 Afterlife and eschatology: eternal accountability vs. finality of death

Islam asserts a vivid and detailed doctrine of the afterlife. Human souls survive physical death, encounter an intermediate state (barzakh), and will be resurrected on the Day of Judgement (Yawm al- Qiyamah). Deeds are weighed, and individuals face eternal reward in Paradise (Jannah) or punishment in Hell (Jahannam). The belief in the afterlife shapes moral behaviour and provides comfort and justice: wrongdoers will not ultimately escape punishment, and those who suffer unjustly will be recompensed. The afterlife is considered more real and significant than the transient life of this world. Classical Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sīna stressed that true happiness belongs to the soul in the afterlife and that worldly pleasures are fleeting.

Humanism generally denies any personal existence beyond death. Consciousness ceases, and there is no heaven or hell (Lamont, 1990). Humanists thus reject the notion of eternal reward or punishment as unfounded. Instead, they find meaning in the natural cycle of life—atoms return to the earth, ideas and actions influence future generations. Humanist funeral rituals often emphasise celebrating the life lived and the enduring influence of the deceased. Facing mortality without belief in an afterlife can be daunting. However, humanists seek solace in the preciousness of each moment and the opportunity to leave the world better than they found it. This finality encourages a focus on immediate ethical concerns rather than deferred hopes.

6 Discussion

The profound differences between Islamic and humanist worldviews have significant implications for contemporary moral debates, social policy, and intercultural dialogue. At the heart of these differences is the question of authority. Islamic thinkers see God's sovereignty as the ultimate basis for law and morality. Many Muslim- majority countries incorporate elements of Sharīʿa into legal systems; issues such as blasphemy, apostasy, inheritance laws, and sexual ethics are often regulated by reference to religious principles. Humanists, by contrast, advocate for secular laws grounded in individual rights and collective well-being. They view restrictions derived from religious texts as infringing personal autonomy. Conflicts over freedom of expression, gender equality, and LGBTQ rights often arise from these opposing premises.

The difference in epistemological commitments also shapes educational policies. A humanist approach favours teaching evolutionary biology, critical thinking, and comparative religion in a secular framework. In some Muslim contexts, challenges arise when scientific theories—such as evolution—appear to contradict literal readings of scripture. Modern Muslim scholars have offered interpretations reconciling evolution with Islam, but tension persists. Additionally, humanist ethics, which emphasise autonomy and choice, sometimes clash with Islamic norms regarding family roles and modesty. Debates about headscarves, marriage laws, and reproductive rights illustrate these tensions.

Despite divergences, there are areas of convergence and potential dialogue. Both worldviews value justice, compassion, charity, and the pursuit of knowledge. The Qur'an commands believers to help the poor and oppressed, and humanism advocates social welfare and global solidarity. Collaborative humanitarian work demonstrates that people of faith and secular humanists can come together to alleviate suffering. Additionally, some contemporary Muslim intellectuals advocate for an "Islamic humanism," emphasizing

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reason, moral autonomy, and a broad conception of human dignity within an Islamic framework (Goodman, 2003). Conversely, some humanists recognise a need for a sense of transcendence and community that religion provides, seeking secular equivalents. Dialogue that acknowledges shared ethical concerns while respecting philosophical differences can build mutual understanding.

The rise of pluralism in modern societies necessitates frameworks for coexisting worldviews. Secular legal systems that protect freedom of religion and conscience can allow Muslims to practice their faith while ensuring that non- Muslims and humanists are not compelled to follow religious laws. Meanwhile, Muslim communities can uphold their values while engaging in democratic processes. Interfaith and inter-belief dialogues can help dispel stereotypes and foster trust. Recognising that each worldview offers insights into human dignity and moral responsibility may encourage constructive engagement rather than confrontation.

7 Conclusion

This comparative analysis highlights the foundational divergence between the Islamic and humanist worldviews. Islam is anchored in theocentrism: God is the measure of all things, revelation is the criterion of truth, morality is rooted in divine command, the purpose of life is worship, and the afterlife provides ultimate accountability. Humans have dignity and responsibility because they are created by Allah and serve as stewards on earth. Secular Humanism, on the other hand, is built on anthropocentrism: the universe is self-existent, human reason and science are the primary sources of knowledge, ethics arise from human needs and empathy, meaning is constructed through self-realization and social contribution, and death marks the end of consciousness. Humans are thus free—and obligated—to determine their own destiny.

These worldviews often lead to conflicting perspectives on law, human rights, education, and social ethics. However, they also share a common commitment to justice, compassion, and human dignity. Understanding their differences and commonalities is crucial for dialogue in our pluralistic age. By appreciating how Muslims view life through a God-centered lens and humanists through a human-centered lens, policymakers, educators, and citizens can foster more nuanced discussions about ethics, rights, and the role of religion in public life. The conversation between “Man” and “God” is likely to continue as one of the defining dialogues of our time; approaching it with intellectual humility and mutual respect can enrich both sides and contribute to a more harmonious global society.

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Online ISSN 3006-4651

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