



## *The Crisis of Humanism: Surah al-‘Asr and the Qur’anic Model of True Success*

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### Abstract

This paper examines Surah al-‘Asr as a concise but comprehensive Qur’anic critique of humanism in its secular and self-sufficient forms. It argues that the surah’s declaration that “indeed, mankind is in loss” is not merely a spiritual warning to isolated individuals, but a diagnosis of a wider human condition in which people, when centered in place of divine guidance, become vulnerable to moral instability, existential confusion, fragmentation, and social decline. Through close textual analysis of Surah al-‘Asr, engagement with classical Qur’anic exegesis, selected Prophetic hadith, and modern scholarship on humanism, meaning, morality, and social inequality, the paper shows that the four conditions of salvation named in the surah—faith, righteous deeds, mutual exhortation to truth, and mutual exhortation to patience—together form a complete Qur’anic model of human flourishing. The study argues that this model directly challenges the assumptions of autonomous humanism by grounding meaning in transcendence, ethics in revelation, social responsibility in truth, and moral endurance in patience. Its central finding is that Surah al-‘Asr offers an integrated alternative to modern human-centered worldviews: it affirms human dignity but rejects human self-sufficiency; it values action but binds it to accountability before God; and it recognizes society but orders social life around truth rather than desire. In this sense, the surah presents a powerful response to modern crises of meaning, atomization, and moral uncertainty (Copson & Grayling, 2015; Hare, 2019; Metz, 2024; Qur’an 103:1–3).

**Keywords:** Surah al-‘Asr, humanism, Qur’anic ethics, meaning, morality, faith, righteous deeds, truth, patience, human flourishing



## Introduction

Surah al-'Asr is among the shortest chapters of the Qur'an, yet Muslim scholars have long regarded it as one of the most comprehensive summaries of the human condition. In only three verses, the surah opens with an oath by time, declares that humanity is in loss, and then identifies the four qualities that alone rescue human beings from ruin: faith, righteous deeds, mutual exhortation to truth, and mutual exhortation to patience. Classical tafsir presents the surah not merely as a devotional passage, but as a condensed map of salvation, one that joins theology, ethics, and collective responsibility in a single framework (Ibn Kathir, n.d.; Qur'an 103:1-3).

This paper places Surah al-'Asr in dialogue with modern humanism. Humanism is a complex and historically diverse term. It has appeared in civic, literary, philosophical, secular, and religious forms. Yet many modern forms of humanism, especially secular ones, place strong emphasis on human agency, human reason, and human self-determination as primary sources of value and meaning. Major academic works present humanism as a broad worldview concerned with dignity, ethics, and human flourishing without necessary dependence on divine revelation (Copson & Grayling, 2015; Copson et al., 2022; Pinn, 2021). The present study focuses especially on the human-centered tendency that elevates the human being into the final authority over meaning, morality, and success.

This concern is especially relevant in the contemporary world. Modern societies are marked by widening inequality, intensified individualism, weakened moral consensus, and persistent anxiety concerning purpose and value. Social and philosophical scholarship continues to wrestle with whether stable meaning and moral obligation can be sustained without transcendence. Surah al-'Asr addresses this situation with unusual brevity and force: it refuses to ground success in autonomous human self-assertion, instead anchoring it in faith, action, truth, and patience (Chancel et al., 2022; Hare, 2019; Metz, 2024; OECD, 2024).

## Background and Significance

The importance of this topic lies in the intersection of Qur'anic interpretation, Islamic moral theology, and modern debates about humanism, secular ethics, and the meaning of life. On the one hand, Surah al-'Asr presents a revealed account of the human condition in which loss is the default unless the self is transformed by faith and disciplined by a moral and social framework. On the other hand, modern humanist traditions often seek to construct meaning and ethics through human reason, moral sentiment, or collective judgment without appeal to revelation. The tension between these two approaches makes Surah al-'Asr highly significant for contemporary intellectual discussion (Copson et al., 2022; Hare, 2019; Nederman, 2019).

The topic is also significant because the question of human flourishing is not merely theoretical. Philosophical debate continues over whether objective or ultimate meaning can exist without God. At the same time, social realities such as inequality, competition, and fragmentation raise doubts about the sufficiency of purely human-centered models of progress. In this context, Surah al-'Asr offers a compact but far-reaching alternative: human success requires transcendence, moral discipline, truthfulness, and social endurance rather than self-reference and autonomous self-definition alone (Chancel et al., 2022; Metz, 2024; OECD, 2024).



### Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to interpret Surah al-‘Asr as a Qur’anic critique of self-sufficient humanism and to show how the surah offers a complete alternative model of true success. The first objective is to establish how the surah diagnoses human loss. The second objective is to analyze the four Qur’anic conditions of salvation as a coherent framework for human flourishing. The third objective is to compare this framework with central assumptions often associated with secular humanism, especially moral autonomy, self-grounded meaning, and the privatization of truth. The fourth objective is to show that the surah binds individual salvation to social responsibility, thereby offering not merely a private ethic but a communal vision of reform (Copson & Grayling, 2015; Qur’an 103:1-3).

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study asks four main questions. First, how does Surah al-‘Asr define human loss and true success? Second, how does the surah challenge human-centered assumptions about self-sufficiency and moral autonomy? Third, how do classical tafsir and hadith deepen the social implications of faith, righteous deeds, truth, and patience? Fourth, what relevance does the surah retain in a world marked by inequality, moral pluralism, and crises of meaning (Hare, 2019; Metz, 2024)?

The paper advances two hypotheses. **H1:** Surah al-‘Asr is not merely a devotional text concerned with personal piety, but a comprehensive Qur’anic anthropology in which salvation depends on integrating belief, ethics, truthfulness, and communal endurance. **H2:** Humanism, especially in forms that absolutize human autonomy and detach morality from revelation, reproduces the very condition of “loss” that the surah diagnoses (Qur’an 103:1-3).

### Literature Review

The literature on humanism is broad and must be approached with conceptual care. Civic humanism, for example, has roots in classical and Renaissance traditions of citizenship, virtue, and public responsibility rather than simple secularism. Historical accounts of humanism also connect it with the ideal of *humanitas* and the dignity of the human person. These traditions show that humanism is not a single doctrine but a family of perspectives. For this reason, the present paper does not reduce all forms of humanism to one position. Rather, it focuses on the strain of modern humanism in which the human being becomes the central source of meaning, judgment, and value (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2026; Nederman, 2019).

Several important academic works are especially relevant. *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism* presents humanism as a broad approach to life and discusses its philosophical, ethical, and political dimensions (Copson & Grayling, 2015). *Understanding Humanism* offers a systematic account of humanism as a nonreligious worldview and explains its assumptions about ethics, human dignity, and modern life (Copson et al., 2022). *What Is Humanism For?* further develops the attempt to present humanism as a morally serious social outlook (Norman, 2025). These studies are valuable because they demonstrate that humanism remains an active worldview rather than merely a historical category.

The philosophical debate about meaning further sharpens the issue. Contemporary work on the meaning of life shows that one central dispute concerns whether ultimate or objective meaning requires a relation to God. Some philosophers defend secular sources of meaning, such as fulfillment, achievement, or contribution, while others argue that the deepest or fullest meaning depends on transcendence (Metz, 2024). Surah al-‘Asr enters



this debate from a revealed standpoint. Rather than beginning with human self-affirmation, it begins with divine judgment on the human condition: humanity is in a state of loss unless it is reshaped by faith, righteous deeds, truth, and patience. In this respect, the surah presents a direct challenge to strongly immanent accounts of human fulfillment. The question of morality is equally important. Philosophical work on religion and morality shows that the relation between ethical obligation and transcendence remains a major area of debate, especially in the context of Abrahamic traditions (Hare, 2019). Humanist literature often seeks to preserve moral seriousness without appeal to revelation, grounding ethics instead in reason, empathy, human need, or social consensus (Copson & Grayling, 2015). Surah al-‘Asr offers a different framework. It does not treat morality as an open-ended product of human agreement. Instead, it binds moral worth to divine truth, righteous action, and mutual obligation. That does not mean that all nonreligious moral concerns lack social value. Still, it does mean that the surah defines ultimate success by revealed accountability rather than by human approval alone.

An important nuance emerges from Islamic intellectual history itself. Lenn Goodman’s *Islamic Humanism* shows that Islamic civilization also preserved powerful resources for speaking about human dignity, ethical cultivation, and rational reflection (Goodman, 2003). This is significant because it clarifies that the Qur’anic critique of secular humanism is not a rejection of the human person as such. Surah al-‘Asr does not deny human dignity. Rather, it denies that the human being can become self-grounding, morally sovereign, or sufficient unto himself. The real opposition, therefore, is not between Islam and the worth of man, but between a God-centered understanding of man and a self-centered understanding of man.

The social context of this debate should not be ignored. Modern societies continue to experience widening inequalities and deepening social strain. Research on wealth concentration and inequality shows that material advancement does not necessarily produce social cohesion or moral stability. The global concentration of wealth in a small minority, together with broader patterns of competition and social fragmentation, raises questions about whether human flourishing can be sustained through material progress alone (Chancel et al., 2022; OECD, 2024). Surah al-‘Asr becomes especially relevant here because it places human success not in accumulation, self-assertion, or worldly dominance, but in faith, righteousness, truth, and patient endurance.

### Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary methodology. It combines close textual analysis of Surah al-‘Asr with engagement in classical tafsir, selected hadith, and modern scholarship on humanism, meaning, morality, and inequality. The textual analysis focuses on the four conditions named in the surah—faith, righteous deeds, mutual exhortation to truth, and mutual exhortation to patience—and reads them as an integrated theory of human flourishing rather than a loose list of virtues.

The method is interpretive rather than positivist. It does not claim that Surah al-‘Asr explicitly addresses “humanism” as a modern intellectual movement in a historical sense. Rather, it argues that the surah articulates enduring moral patterns that illuminate and critique human-centered worldviews. Modern academic sources are used descriptively and comparatively, not as authorities over the Qur’an. Their role is to clarify the contemporary forms of autonomy, relativism, and social fragmentation against which the Qur’anic framework can be read (Copson et al., 2022; Hare, 2019; Metz, 2024).



Selected hadith are also used to deepen the communal and ethical dimensions of the surah. These reports are especially important because they show that the Qur'anic path to salvation is not a solitary spirituality. Believers are repeatedly described as mutually supporting, morally interdependent, and socially responsible for one another (Al-Bukhari, n.d.; Muslim, n.d.).

### Findings/Results

The first finding is that Surah al-'Asr presents **loss** as the default human condition unless interrupted by a divinely ordered transformation. Humanity is not portrayed as naturally secure, complete, or sufficient. It is declared to be in *khusr*—loss, wasting, or ruin—except for those who meet four conditions. This directly challenges stronger forms of humanism that trust in autonomous reason or self-generated purpose as sufficient foundations for flourishing. In the logic of the surah, the deepest human problem is not simply lack of knowledge or lack of progress, but misorientation away from God (Ibn Kathir, n.d.; Qur'an 103:1-3).

The second finding is that **faith** in the surah functions as a complete worldview rather than a merely inward conviction. It grounds purpose, accountability, and direction. This is especially important when read alongside philosophical discussions about the meaning of life. Where secular philosophy continues to debate whether life can possess ultimate meaning without transcendence, the surah resolves the issue by locating true significance in relation to God, revelation, and final accountability (Metz, 2024). Faith is therefore not one element among others; it is the foundation that rescues man from accident, isolation, and moral drift.

The third finding is that **righteous deeds** in Surah al-'Asr oppose not only passivity, but also morally unstable action. Modern humanist accounts often seek to preserve ethics without transcendence. Still, the surah insists that true action must align with divine truth rather than mere human praise or shifting social approval. This is significant because it suggests that moral activism without a stable transcendent anchor remains vulnerable to instability, inconsistency, and redefinition (Copson & Grayling, 2015; Hare, 2019). In the surah's framework, deeds matter, but only as deeds rightly ordered under God.

The fourth finding is that **mutual exhortation to truth** shifts the model of success from private virtue to public responsibility. Truth is not treated as a personal preference or a private possession. It is something believers owe one another. This directly challenges the privatization of morality that often accompanies secular individualism, where truth becomes negotiable and ethical obligation becomes confined to personal choice. The hadith literature strongly reinforces this communal dimension by portraying believers as one body in compassion and as a structure whose parts strengthen one another (Al-Bukhari, n.d.; Muslim, n.d.).

The fifth finding is that **mutual exhortation to patience** introduces endurance into the moral life. Patience here is not passive resignation but principled steadfastness under pressure. Without it, truth cannot survive opposition, and reform cannot continue beyond the first moment of difficulty. This condition is especially relevant in an age shaped by immediate gratification, emotional volatility, and consumer-driven fragility. The surah, therefore, offers not merely a moral ideal but a framework for sustained ethical struggle.

The sixth finding is that the four principles are inseparable. Faith without righteous action becomes an empty claim. Action without truth becomes drift. Truth without patience becomes short-lived. Patience without faith becomes mere stoicism. Surah al-'Asr is



therefore not a list of disconnected virtues; it is a unified Qur'anic theory of human success in which salvation depends upon the integration of belief, conduct, truthfulness, and endurance.

### Discussion

The central implication of these findings is that Surah al-'Asr should be read as a Qur'anic response to the crisis of humanism. The surah does not deny human dignity; it denies human self-sufficiency. This distinction is crucial. Some modern forms of humanism rightly seek to defend the value of the human person, moral seriousness, and social responsibility. Yet when the human being becomes his own highest authority, meaning becomes unstable, morality becomes negotiable, and social life becomes increasingly fragmented. Surah al-'Asr restores the human being precisely by refusing to enthrone him (Copson et al., 2022; Goodman, 2003; Norman, 2025).

This reading also has deep social significance. The surah does not allow religion to remain a private sentiment. Salvation is tied not only to what the individual believes and does, but also to whether he participates in sustaining truth and patience in the community. This transforms the surah into a social ethic. It calls for a moral order in which individuals are accountable for one another's relation to truth. In an age of privatized spirituality and individualized morality, this remains one of the surah's most powerful lessons (Al-Bukhari, n.d.; Muslim, n.d.).

At the same time, academic caution is necessary. Humanism is a broad and diverse field, and not every historical form of humanism is equally committed to radical autonomy or hostile to religion. The critique offered here is therefore directed not at all concern for human dignity, but at those human-centered frameworks that make revelation unnecessary and man sufficient unto himself. Against such frameworks, Surah al-'Asr proposes a different anthropology: man is morally significant but not self-grounding; socially responsible but not morally sovereign; capable of action but in need of divine guidance (Goodman, 2003; Nederman, 2019; Pinn, 2021).

### Conclusion

Surah al-'Asr offers one of the most concise and penetrating Qur'anic accounts of the human condition. In three short verses, it diagnoses humanity's crisis, identifies the path of rescue, and binds personal salvation to collective moral responsibility. Its claim is radical in its simplicity: humanity is in a state of loss unless it is shaped by faith, righteous deeds, and mutual exhortation to truth and patience. Read carefully, the surah is not only devotional. It is philosophical, ethical, and civilizational.

When placed alongside modern debates about humanism, meaning, morality, and inequality, the surah becomes even more relevant. It challenges the assumption that human beings can become sufficient unto themselves, that ethics can remain stable without transcendence, and that social flourishing can emerge from competition and self-interest alone. In place of human-centered autonomy, it offers a God-centered framework in which meaning is anchored, action is disciplined, truth is shared, and endurance is sustained. That is why Surah al-'Asr remains a powerful Qur'anic answer to the crisis of humanism: it restores the human being not by elevating him above all else, but by rightly locating him before God, within community, and under the discipline of truth (Hare, 2019; Metz, 2024; Qur'an 103:1-3).

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