Islamic Humanism

Islamic humanism refers to the rich literary, intellectual and cultural discourse that flourished throughout Islamic civilization. The refined sensibilities of secretaries supervising the bureaucracy of the early Islamic state lead to the rise of a class of Islamic humanists (udabā’, sg. adīb). Their poetic and homiletic exchanges at courtly gatherings and soirées were recorded and became the foundation for the large body of classical Arabic literature (ādab). At the heart of Islamic humanism, however, is a pre-occupation with preserving the record of Muḥammad’s life and emulating the eloquence of the Qurʾān.

Humanism in the Qurʾān

In the Qurʾān the prophet Muḥammad is sent “as a mercy to the universe” (Qurʾān 21:107). This universalist outlook is the source of humanism in the Qurʾān, and is demonstrated throughout the ethical teachings of the text. On the social level, its audience is instructed to care for relatives, widows, orphans, outcasts, vagabonds, slaves and the poor (Qurʾān 2:177; 4:2-3, 10; 89:17-20). On the individual level the Qurʾān asserts each human being’s God given freedom (Qurʾān 2:256; 39:41), dignity (Qurʾān 17:70) and intellect (2:170-71; 3:190-91; 96:1-5). It is the intellect bestowed upon mankind that allows them to hear and comprehend its teachings. Only then can they be held accountable before God on the Day of Judgment (Qurʾān 6:130). According to Islamic tradition, the prophet Muḥammad was the exemplar of qurʾānic ethics.

The second dimension of humanism in the Qurʾān is the poetic form in which the prophet Muḥammad articulated revelation. Since he articulated revelation in the form of rhymed prose characteristic of Arabian holy men, Muḥammad’s interlocutors accused him of being a poet, priest, mad man or a fraud (Qurʾān 52:29-33). The Arabian sphere in which the prophet Muḥammad lived was steeped in poetic eloquence. Thus we find that the Qurʾān appeals to the intellect of its audience in all manners of literary and rhetorical style. In this vein, the cultural refinement of the Qurʾān is manifested in its “clear Arabic language” (Qurʾān 16:103; 26:195). The linguistic and literary significance of humanism in the Qurʾān had a great impact on Early as well as Classical Islam.

Humanism in Early and Classical Islam

Once the center of the Islamic state moved from Medina to Damascus, and later to Baghdad, early humanists including al-Khalīl b. ʿAḥmad (d. ca. 173/789) and Abū Ubaydah (d. 210/825) endeavored to preserve the poetic speech of the pre-Islamic Arabian sphere in which the prophet Muḥammad received revelation. In this vein, the jurist and poet al-Shāfīʿī (d. 206/820) believed that no one can truly master the Arabic language except a prophet. Similarly, the litterateur and theologian al-Jāhiz (d. 255/868) claimed that whereas Moses lived in the age of magic and Jesus in the age of healing, Muḥammad lived in the age of fine rhetoric (balāghah). It was in this spirit that the early humanists compiled the ancient poetry of Arabia known as the “suspended odes” (muʿallaqāt) and, moreover, why the great Arab poet was nicknamed al-Mutanabī (d. 354/965), meaning “pseudo-prophet.” Arabic poetry was granted tremendous value and esteem among the diverse works of classical Islamic humanism.

In addition to the importance of poetic eloquence, essential to the endeavors of early humanists was the collection of oral reports (akhbār, sg. khabar) celebrating the battles and
heroes during the “days of the Arabs” (ayyām al-‘arab). Most important in this regard were the oral reports going back to the battles of the prophet Muḥammad and the narrative of his life. Works narrating the “biography” (ṣīrah) of the prophet, like that of Ibn Isḥāq (d. ca. 151/768), served as the model for historiographical, biographical and genealogical writing throughout the classical period.

Oral reports traceable to the person of the prophet Muḥammad himself, and which demonstrate his way of life, were called hadiths. Each hadith is composed of two parts, a chain of transmission and the text transmitted. In the 2nd/8th century early collections were arranged according to transmitter or subject. As the record of the prophet Muḥammad’s sayings, actions and judgments, these collections formed the main body of Islamic prophetic tradition (sunnah), which al-Shāfīʿī established as one of the four sources of Islamic Law. Due to strong religious and political debates within the Islamic state, hadiths of dubious origin were ascribed to the prophet Muḥammad in order to give legitimacy to competing claims. By the 3rd/9th century scholars like al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875) only collected hadiths whose chain of transmission was considered reliable (sahih). Furthermore, the science of hadith collection flourished alongside genres of literature that documented the ‘biographies of transmitters’ (rijāl) and ‘generations of scholars’ (tabaqāt) more generally.

The emphasis on preserving the authentic tradition of the prophet Muhammad influenced classical scholarship as a whole and gave it an unmistakably Islamic flavor. Historians, exegetes and biographers were criticized for relying on reports from weak transmitters, or reports from Judeo-Christian tradition. Philosophy and philosophical theology gradually declined in favor of juridical scholarship. Moreover, the probative nature of classical Islamic humanism had a great influence on Medieval European humanism. In this vein the return to the wisdom of Greek and Latin classics by Petrarch (d. 1374) and the philological stuffy of the Bible by Erasmus (d. 1536) echoed the quest of Islamic humanists to preserve their tradition of their prophet and master the eloquence of their scripture. In modern times the ethical and speculative impulses of classical Islamic humanism have resurfaced in the works of Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Mohammed Arkoun (d. 2010). The work known as On the Margins of the Biography (‘alā hāmish al-ṣīrah) by Tāhā Husayn (d. 1973) is, furthermore, a prime example of how modern humanists have retold the prophet Muḥammad’s biography, paying particular attention to modern, social insights but also writing in dialogue with the classical Islamic scholarship before it.

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See also:
References


