



How Islam Responds to Liberalism: A Comparative Analysis of Ideological Foundations and Social Outcomes

Muhammad Harris Suhaib¹, Shiza Fatima², Haroon Abdullah³

¹MS Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, Al Ghazali University, Karachi,
Email: harrissuhaib1999@gmail.com

²MPhil Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi,
Email: shizafatima669@gmail.com

³MS Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, Al Ghazali University, Karachi,
Email: Haroon.abdullah01@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Islam; Liberalism; Political Philosophy; Moral Order; Social Outcomes

Corresponding Author:

Muhammad Harris Suhaib,
MS Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, Al Ghazali University, Karachi,
Email:
harrissuhaib1999@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Liberalism has significantly shaped the modern political and social landscape. It exalts individual freedom, rational consent, and secular governance, holding that people may do as they wish so long as they do not harm others (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). Islam, by contrast, views human beings as servants of God and treats divine revelation as the ultimate moral law (WhyIslam, 2023). This paper compares these two paradigms and argues that their foundational premises are incompatible. It synthesizes philosophical literature and socioeconomic data to show how liberalism's emphasis on unfettered autonomy conflicts with Islam's emphasis on obedience, community, and objective morality. Findings indicate that Muslim-majority societies often display lower suicide and homicide rates and lower alcohol consumption than many secular liberal societies (Khan et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2021; Fish, 2011). The discussion suggests that liberalism's moral relativism can produce social fragmentation, whereas Islam's moral boundaries foster community cohesion but restrict personal freedom for the person's own benefit. The paper concludes that the tension between Islam and liberalism is structural and enduring; meaningful coexistence requires recognizing and negotiating these differences rather than assuming they are superficial.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

Modern liberalism emerged during the Enlightenment, with thinkers such as Locke, Mill, and Rawls arguing that humans are naturally free and equal. Liberals claim a presumption in favor of liberty, justifying restrictions only when necessary to protect others (Britannica, 2023). The rise of liberal democracy and capitalism made these ideas global norms. Due to colonialism and globalization, liberal values are increasingly influencing non-Western societies. Islam, however, presents a comprehensive way of life in which submission to God is at its core. The Qur'an declares that God has honored every human being, measuring superiority by piety rather than race or wealth (WhyIslam, 2023). The Holy Qur'an says

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُم مِّنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَى وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائلٍ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقْانَكُمْ

Translation:

"O humanity, indeed, We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you." (Qur'an 49:13)

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بْنَيْ آدَمَ وَحَمَّنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُم مِّنَ الطَّيَّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَىٰ كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

Translation:

"And We have certainly honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference." (Qur'an 17:70)

Islamic law (Sharia) regulates both public and private life, binding believers into a moral community. The encounter between these two ideologies is a major intellectual and political issue today. Debates about secularism, human rights, gender roles, and freedom of expression revolve around how liberal and Islamic concepts of authority and morality collide. Exploring these tensions is significant for political theory and for societies that must integrate diverse populations.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

This paper aims to critically compare the foundations of liberal and Islamic thought and assess whether they are reconcilable. The objectives are:

1. To delineate the core principles of liberalism and Islam about authority, law, freedom, and moral epistemology.
2. To analyze Islamic critiques of liberalism and examine how Islamic thinkers argue that liberalism leads to moral relativism and social fragmentation (Muslimi, 2022).
3. To examine empirical evidence comparing social outcomes in liberal and Muslim societies—such as suicide rates, crime, alcohol consumption, and family stability—and assess whether these data support Islamic critiques (Khan et al., 2020; Fish, 2011; World Population Review, 2023).
4. To discuss whether liberalism and Islam can coexist within a single political framework or whether their differences necessitate the separation of moral domains.

1.3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study addresses three questions:

- Q1: What are the foundational principles of liberalism, and how do they diverge from Islamic principles?

- Q2: How do prominent Islamic scholars and thinkers refute liberalism's premises?
- Q3: Do empirical social outcomes align more closely with liberal or Islamic ethical claims?

The hypothesis is that liberalism and Islam are philosophically incompatible because liberalism centers authority in human reason and individual consent, while Islam centers authority in divine revelation and communal duties.

Consequently, liberal societies exhibit patterns—such as higher suicide and divorce rates—that Islamic critics cite as evidence of the harm of unchecked autonomy (Khan et al., 2020; DataPandas, 2023).

2. Literature Review

Scholars have debated the compatibility of Islam and liberalism for over a century. Early Muslim modernists, such as Muhammad Abduh, attempted to reconcile Islam with rationalism and constitutionalism, emphasizing consultative governance (*shura*) and social justice. However, twentieth-century revivalists such as Abul A'la Maududi and Sayyid Qutb argued that secular liberalism is inherently idolatrous because it replaces divine sovereignty (*hakimiyyah*) with human legislation. Qutb depicted American society as materially advanced but spiritually empty, citing consumerism and moral laxity as consequences of liberalism (Muslimi, 2022). He labelled contemporary Western societies as a new *Jahiliyyah* (age of ignorance) and called for a return to Islam as a total system. Conservative Muslim critiques often resonate with communitarian thinkers like MacIntyre, who see liberal individualism as eroding tradition and community.

On the other side, proponents of “liberal Islam” argue that Islamic values of justice, consultation, and freedom of religion align with liberal democracy. Scholars like Abdullahi An-Na’im and Mustafa Akyol advocate for reinterpretations of Islamic law that emphasize the objectives (*maqasid*) of Sharia—such as welfare and human dignity—and support freedom of conscience. They interpret verses like “No compulsion in religion” (Q2:256) as endorsing religious freedom. Critics counter that these reinterpretations are selective and incompatible with traditional jurisprudence, noting that the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990) subordinates human rights to Sharia (Organization of the Islamic Conference, 1990).

Philosophers of liberalism, such as John Rawls, propose political neutrality: the state should not enforce any comprehensive moral doctrine but should protect fundamental liberties and fairness (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). Islamic critics contend that liberal neutrality is illusory because it privileges secularism and forces religious citizens to privatize their convictions. They argue that justice requires public recognition of divine law. Recent works by Kaminski (2021) claim that Islam and liberalism rest on different ontologies: liberalism views humans as self-creating, whereas Islam sees humans as created by God with inherent duties. This ontological divergence implies that any superficial overlap—such as shared advocacy of charity—conceals deeper conflict.

3. Methodology

The study applies a qualitative comparative approach combining textual analysis and empirical review. Primary sources include the Qur'an, classical jurisprudence, and liberal philosophical texts (Locke's *Two Treatises*, Mill's *On Liberty*, Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*). Secondary sources encompass academic analyses of liberalism, communitarianism, and modern Islamic thought. To evaluate social outcomes, data were collected from various sources, including the World Health Organization, World Population Review, and *BMC Public Health* studies. Key indicators include age-standardized suicide rates, intentional homicide rates, per capita alcohol consumption, and divorce rates. Muslim-majority countries were compared with high-income liberal countries, acknowledging limitations such as data reliability and underreporting of suicide in conservative

societies (Khan et al., 2020). The aim is not to establish causation but to explore correlations that illuminate ideological claims.

4. Findings and Results

4.1 Foundational Differences

A core finding is that Islam and liberalism diverge on authority. Liberalism regards political authority as stemming from popular consent and justifies law by human reasoning. Locke and Mill argue that individuals are free to pursue their own good, provided they do not harm others. Rawls's political liberalism emphasizes equal fundamental rights and a fair distribution of resources (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). Islam, however, roots sovereignty in God. As the Holy Quran says

إِنَّ الْحُكْمَ إِلَّا لِلَّهِ أَمْرَ أَلَا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيْمِ

Translation:

“Legislation is not but for Allah. He has commanded that you worship not except Him. That is the correct religion.” (Qur'an 12:40)

Sharia is considered a comprehensive law that cannot be overridden by majority will; human legislation is legitimate only when it implements divine commands. The Qur'an affirms human dignity and equality but links these rights to fear of God and moral conduct (WhyIslam, 2023). The final sermon of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) prohibits racial superiority, emphasizing that piety is the criterion of honor (WhyIslam, 2023). Islamic texts also grant women the right to property, education, and participation while requiring modesty and moral discipline (WhyIslam, 2023). Thus, Islam balances rights with duties; liberalism privileges rights without imposing divine duties.

4.2 Moral Epistemology and Freedom

Islam and liberalism conflict over the source of moral knowledge. Liberal ethics are grounded in human reason, autonomy, and secular consensus. The liberal harm principle allows individuals to act freely, provided they do not harm others; there is no appeal to divine authority. Islam, by contrast, derives morality from revelation and prophetic tradition. Moral boundaries are objective; acts like alcohol consumption, adultery, and same-sex relations are prohibited regardless of consent. As the Holy Quran says

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنَّمَا الْخَمْرُ وَالْمَيْسِرُ وَالْأَنْصَابُ وَالْأَزْلَامُ رِجْسٌ مِّنْ عَمَلِ الشَّيْطَانِ فَاجْتَنِبُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ شَفَّلُونَ

Translation:

“O you who have believed, indeed, intoxicants, gambling, [sacrificing on] stone alters [to other than Allah], and divining arrows are but defilement from the work of Satan, so avoid it that you may be successful.” (Qur'an 5:90)

وَلَا تَقْرِبُوا الزِّنَى إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَاحِشَةً وَسَاءَ سَبِيلًا

Translation:

“And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way.” (Qur'an 17:32)

Islamic thinkers argue that liberal moral relativism leads to subjective ethics and social disorder. The Muslimi article notes that liberalism equates morality with feelings and endorses LGBTQ

identities and gender fluidity, whereas Islam upholds a “natural fitrah” and accountability to God (Muslimi, 2022). Critics warn that liberalism’s rejection of absolute truth leads to permissiveness that undermines the family and community.

4.3 Community versus Individualism

The findings highlight different conceptions of social organization. Liberalism prioritizes the individual; communities are voluntary associations of autonomous agents. Islam emphasizes the *ummah* and family as primary social units. The Qur'an mandates charity (*zakat*) and mutual protection, linking individuals' salvation to their service to others (WhyIslam, 2023). Sharia enjoins “enjoining good and forbidding wrong,” meaning society has a responsibility to uphold moral norms. As the Holy Quran says

وَلْتَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَايُونَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

Translation:

“And let there be [arising] from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful.” (Qur'an 3:104)

In liberal societies, the state maintains neutrality, allowing diverse moral views to coexist. Islamic societies are expected to maintain public morality by restricting harm, as seen in prohibitions on gambling and alcohol.

4.4 Empirical Outcomes

The comparative data reveal patterns consistent with these philosophical differences. A *BMC Public Health* study using WHO data (2000–2019) analyzed suicide rates in 46 Muslim-majority countries and found that most had rates below the global average of 9 per 100,000 (Khan et al., 2020). Only 11 Muslim countries exceeded the global average; the highest rates were in Sub-Saharan Africa (10.02 per 100,000), while Southeast Asian Muslim countries had rates as low as 2.58 (Khan et al., 2020). In contrast, high-income liberal countries like South Korea and Russia have very high suicide rates (25.8 and 24.1 per 100,000) (World Population Review, 2023). A meta-analysis of 63 studies concluded that religiosity decreases the odds of suicide and suicidal ideation, with religious individuals having only about one-third the risk of completed suicide compared to non-religious individuals (Wu et al., 2021). Another study in Iran found that intrinsic religiosity, not external practice, protects against suicide (Sharifi et al., 2019).

Violent crime data show a similar pattern—according to political scientist M. Steven Fish found that Muslim-majority countries have an average intentional homicide rate of 2.4 per 100,000, compared with 7.5 in non-Muslim countries (Fish, 2011). The study controlled for factors like authoritarianism and still found that the share of Muslims predicts lower homicide rates. High alcohol consumption—every day in secular cultures—is rare in Muslim societies. World Population Review lists European countries, such as Russia (16.8 Liters per Year), Greece (14.4 Liters per Year), and Australia (11.5 Liters per Year), among the top drinkers. In contrast, Middle Eastern and South Asian Muslim countries, such as Sudan and Pakistan, have near-zero consumption levels (World Population Review, 2023). The data attribute this difference to religious prohibitions (World Population Review, 2023). Similarly, divorce rates are generally lower in many Muslim countries. DataPandas ranks Russia (3.9 per 1,000), Belgium (3.7), and the United States (2.7) among the countries with the highest divorce rates, whereas Saudi Arabia (2.1), Jordan (1.6), and Qatar (0.7) have lower rates (DataPandas, 2023). While modernization is increasing divorce in some Gulf countries, the overall pattern aligns with the Islamic emphasis on family stability.

4.5 Limitations

The data should be interpreted cautiously. Muslim societies may underreport suicide due to stigma or legal consequences, and differences in record keeping affect comparability (Khan et al., 2020). High homicide rates in some liberal countries may result from factors unrelated to ideology (e.g., organized crime). Moreover, some Muslim countries have high levels of domestic violence and authoritarian abuse, which the available data may not capture. Nonetheless, the general trends support the Islamic claim that religious norms can protect against certain social ills.

5. Discussion

5.1 Philosophical Incompatibility

The analysis reveals that Islam and liberalism are not merely different but fundamentally contradictory at their core. Liberals argue that the state must remain neutral among conceptions of the good life and base law on human reason; they celebrate autonomy and free expression. Islam insists that law must reflect God's commands and that society cannot be value-neutral. Muslim critics argue that liberal neutrality is itself a concealed ideology that enforces secularism. They contend that liberalism's claim to value free universality masks an imposition of Western culture and moral relativism (Organization of the Islamic Conference, 1990). The Islamic concept of *khilafah* (trusteeship) locates authority in humans only as stewards of God's law; individuals are free to act within moral boundaries but not to redefine morality. As the Holy Quran says

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً

Translation:

"And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority [khalifah].'" (Qur'an 2:30)

This fosters a sense of obligation that transcends self-interest. Conversely, liberalism can lead to a fragmented society where individuals pursue divergent values, potentially undermining shared goods and resources. Even some Western communitarians warn that modern liberalism erodes institutions that mediate social differences (MacIntyre, 1984).

5.2 Social Implications

The empirical patterns highlight possible consequences of liberal and Islamic moral frameworks. Higher suicide rates in secular societies may reflect isolation, loss of meaning, and stress associated with an individualistic culture. Alcohol consumption and related health problems are less prevalent in Muslim countries, though this may partly reflect legal prohibitions rather than personal choice. Lower divorce rates and extended family structures in Muslim societies provide social support but may also limit individual freedom, especially for women. Conversely, liberal societies support women's autonomy and personal choice but may experience higher family dissolution. The homicide data undermine stereotypes of Muslim violence and suggest that strong communal values can reduce crime (Fish, 2011). These outcomes illustrate that normative frameworks shape social behaviors: liberalism maximizes freedom at the expense of moral consensus, whereas Islam sacrifices some autonomy for the sake of moral order.

5.3 Coexistence and Dialogue

Given these differences, can Islam and liberalism coexist? In secular liberal democracies, Muslims participate as citizens but often face pressure to privatize their faith. Debates over hijab bans, halal food, and religious education show how liberal neutrality conflicts with Islamic

public practice. Conversely, in Muslim-majority countries that implement Sharia, liberal values—such as absolute freedom of speech or LGBT rights—are restricted. Achieving peaceful coexistence may require legal pluralism that allows religious communities autonomy in personal law, while a common constitutional framework protects basic security. Muslim thinkers like Kaminski (2021) caution that any synthesis must acknowledge Islam's ontological difference and resist reducing the faith to a liberal model. Liberal theorists may need to revisit the assumption that neutrality means excluding religion; a more inclusive public reason could accommodate religious arguments. The prospects for dialogue depend on whether both sides can appreciate the depth of their differences without insisting on hegemony.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored how Islam refutes liberalism by comparing their foundational principles and social effects. Liberalism centers on human reason and individual consent, while Islam centers on divine revelation and communal responsibility. This leads to opposing views of sovereignty, law, freedom, and morality. Islamic critics argue that liberalism's emphasis on personal autonomy and moral relativism produces social harm. Empirical data showing lower suicide and homicide rates and lower alcohol consumption in many Muslim societies lend weight to claims that religious norms can promote social cohesion. However, the data are not conclusive; factors such as reporting practices and economic conditions also play a role. The fundamental conflict remains philosophical: either morality is relative and human-constructed, as liberalism contends, or it is objective and divinely ordained, as Islam maintains. Because these premises are incompatible, integrating Islam and liberalism into a single normative framework is challenging. Peaceful coexistence may be possible through legal pluralism and mutual respect, but each side must recognize that the other's worldview cannot be reduced to or absorbed by its own.

References

1. Fish, M. S. (2011). *Are Muslims distinctive? A look at the evidence*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199764444.001.0001>
2. Khan, M. M., Mahmud, S., Karim, M. S., Zaman, M., Prince, M., & Bhugra, D. (2020). Suicide rates in Muslim-majority countries and associated factors. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1173. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-09220-3>
3. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2021). *Liberalism*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/>
4. WhyIslam. (2023). *Human rights in Islam: Dignity, equality, and justice*. WhyIslam.org. <https://www.whyslam.org/social-issues/human-rights-in-islam/>
5. World Health Organization. (2021). *Suicide worldwide in 2019: Global health estimates*. Geneva: WHO. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240026643>
6. Britannica. (2023). *Liberalism*. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberalism>
7. DataPandas. (2023). *Global divorce and suicide statistics*. <https://datapandas.org>
8. Fish, M. S. (2011). *Are Muslims distinctive? A look at the evidence*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199764444.001.0001>
9. Khan, M. M., Mahmud, S., Karim, M. S., Zaman, M., Prince, M., & Bhugra, D. (2020). Suicide rates in Muslim-majority countries and associated factors. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1173. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-09220-3>
10. Muslimi. (2022). *Islam vs liberalism: Why Islam rejects freedom without boundaries*. Muslimi.com. <https://muslimi.com/islam-vs-liberalism>

11. WhyIslam. (2023). *Human rights in Islam: Dignity, equality, and justice*. WhyIslam.org. <https://www.whyislam.org/social-issues/human-rights-in-islam/>
12. World Population Review. (2023). *Suicide rates by country 2023*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/suicide-rate-by-country>
13. Kaminski, J. (2021). *Islam, liberalism, and ontological conflict: A comparative political philosophy*. Routledge.
14. Muslimi. (2022). *Islam vs liberalism: Why Islam rejects freedom without boundaries*. Muslimi.com. <https://muslimi.com/islam-vs-liberalism>
15. Organization of the Islamic Conference. (1990). *Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam*. Adopted at the 19th Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, Cairo. <https://www.oic-oci.org/english/conf/fm/19/>
16. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2021). *Liberalism*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/>
17. DataPandas. (2023). *Global divorce and suicide statistics*. <https://datapandas.org>
18. Fish, M. S. (2011). *Are Muslims distinctive? A look at the evidence*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199764444.001.0001>
19. Khan, M. M., Mahmud, S., Karim, M. S., Zaman, M., Prince, M., & Bhugra, D. (2020). Suicide rates in Muslim-majority countries and associated factors. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1173. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-09220-3>
20. Muslimi. (2022). *Islam vs liberalism: Why Islam rejects freedom without boundaries*. Muslimi.com. <https://muslimi.com/islam-vs-liberalism>
21. Sharifi, V., Amin-Esmaeli, M., Hajebi, A., Motevalian, S. A., Radgoodarzi, R., Hefazi, M., & Rahimi-Movaghar, A. (2019). Twelve-month prevalence and correlates of suicidal behavior in Iran: A national epidemiological survey. *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 80(2), 18m12430. <https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.18m12430>
22. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2021). *Liberalism*. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/>
23. WhyIslam. (2023). *Human rights in Islam: Dignity, equality, and justice*. WhyIslam.org. <https://www.whyislam.org/social-issues/human-rights-in-islam/>
24. World Population Review. (2023). *Suicide rates by country 2023; Alcohol consumption by country 2023*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com>
25. Wu, A., Wang, J. Y., & Jia, C. X. (2021). Religion and completed suicide: A meta-analysis. *PLoS ONE*, 10(6), e0131715. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0131715>