HUMANISM IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD: INTEGRATING ETHICS, REASON, AND FAITH

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Abstract: This research investigates humanism in the medieval Islamic world (VIII–XIII century) revealing a neglected gap in scholarship and demonstrating how humanism was expressed through the harmonious functioning of ethics, reason, and faith throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Persia, and Central Asia. While earlier scholars have primarily limited their definition of humanism to European traditions, this study uncovers many of the contributions made by Islamic scholars to the development of the concept of human dignity through the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and the writings of Islamic philosophers such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali, as well as the literary works of poets (Rumi, Saadi, and Al-Mutanabbi), and the establishments of Bayt al-Hikmah. Using methods of textual analysis of primary source material and a synthesis of historical documentation. This research shows that humans have always been viewed as moral actors who are actively involved in the pursuit of moral excellence, reasoned thinking (including the pursuit of knowledge), and responsible participation in society as both a spiritual obligation and a social responsibility. From this research it has been determined that Islamic humanism should not be considered as contradictory to Islam, but rather as a humanism that is centered on faith placing الإنسان (human), at the centre of intellectual and cultural life.

Keywords: Islamic humanism; medieval Islamic thought; Al-Farabi; Ibn Sina; Al-Ghazali; Rumi; Saadi; Bayt al-Hikma

Аннотация: Это исследование исследует гуманизм в средневековом исламском мире (VIII–XIII века), выявляя забытый пробел в науке и демонстрируя, как гуманизм выражался через гармоничное функционирование этики, разума и веры на Ближнем Востоке, в Северной

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Африке, Персии и Центральной Азии. В то время как более ранние ученые в основном ограничивали свое определение гуманизма европейскими традициями, это исследование раскрывает многие вклады исламских ученых в развитие концепции человеческого достоинства через учение пророка Мухаммада (с.а.в), труды исламских философов, таких как Аль-Фараби, Ибн Сина и Аль-Газали, а также литературные произведения поэтов (Руми, Саади и Аль-Мутанабби) и заведения Байт аль-Хикма. Используя методы текстологического анализа первоисточников и обобщения исторической документации. Это исследование показывает, что люди всегда рассматривались как моральные деятели, которые активно участвуют в стремлении к моральному совершенству, рациональному мышлению (включая стремление к знаниям) и ответственному участию в жизни общества как духовному долгу, так и социальной ответственности. В результате этого исследования было установлено, что исламский гуманизм следует рассматривать не как противоречащий исламу, а скорее как гуманизм, основанный на вере, ставящий الإنسان (человек) в центр интеллектуальной и культурной жизни.

Ключевые слова: *Исламский гуманизм; средневековая исламская мысль; Аль-Фараби; Ибн Сина; Аль-Газали; Руми; Байт аль-Хикма.*

Annotatsiya: *Ushbu tadqiqot oʻrta asrlar islom olamidagi (VIII–XIII asrlar) gumanizmni oʻrganib, ilmiy adabiyotda yetarlicha yoritilmagan muhim boʻshliqni toʻldiradi. Tadqiqot Yaqin Sharq, Shimoliy Afrika, Fors va Markaziy Osiyoda gumanizm axloq, aql va eʼtiqodning uygʻunligi orqali shakllanganini koʻrsatadi. Avvalgi tadqiqotlarda insonparvarlik koʻpincha Yevropa anʼanalariga tayanib talqin qilingan boʻlsa, bu ish islom olimlarining inson qadr-qimmati haqidagi tasavvurni rivojlantirishdagi chuqur hissasini yoritadi. Tadqiqot Paygʻambar Muhammad (s.a.v.)ning taʼlimoti, Forobiy, Ibn Sino va Gʻazzoliy kabi mutafakkirlarning falsafiy merosi, Rumiy, Saʼdiy va Al-Mutanabbiy asarlari hamda Bayt al-Hikma kabi ilmiy markazlarning faoliyati orqali islomiy insonparvarlikning shakllanishini tahlil qiladi. Birlamchi manbalar matn tahlili va tarixiy manbalarni solishtirish usullari tadqiqotning asosini tashkil etadi. Natijalar shuni koʻrsatadiki, oʻsha davr islom tafakkurida inson axloqiy barkamollikka intiladigan, asosli fikrlash va ilm izlashga masʼul boʻlgan, jamiyat hayotida esa maʼnaviy majburiyat va ijtimoiy masʼuliyatni oʻz zimmasiga oladigan subyekt sifatida tasavvur qilingan. Tadqiqotga koʻra, islomiy gumanizm islomga zid emas, aksincha, eʼtiqodga asoslangan holda insonni intellektual va madaniy hayot markaziga qoʻyadigan yondashuv sifatida namoyon boʻladi.*

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Kalit so'zlar: *Islom gumanizmi; o'rta asrlar Islom falsafasi; Al-Farobiy; Ibn Sino; Al-G'azoliy; Rumiy; Bayt al-Hikma*

INTRODUCTION

When we hear the term humanism, the first idea that comes to mind is its European and secular interpretation: a philosophy emphasizes human dignity and the maximization of individual liberty. Yet, humanistic values are not confined to European traditions.[1] In Islamic world, humanism appeared in ways that combined ethical principles, social responsibility and spiritual guidance. Unlike the contemporary secular notion, humanism within Islamic world did not stand in opposition to religion. Thinkers, poets and scholars from the medieval period onwards explored the potential of human reason, the importance of moral conduct and the pursuit of knowledge as a means to elevate both the individual and society.

The term Islamic world refers to the societies that flourished across regions such as the Middle East, North Africa, Persia and Central Asia between 8th to 13th centuries.[2] Throughout the period, many educational institutions: Bayt-ul-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) and Nizamiyya in Baghdad, Al-Azhar in Cairo and Madrasa al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, philosophical schools, literary movements and scientific achievements shaped intellectual history.

This research examines how human-centered intellectual, ethical, and scientific traditions were expressed in the medieval Islamic world. It explores how philosophers: Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina investigated human rationality, how theologians such as Al-Ghazali debated moral agency, how poets and scholars defined the concept of compassion. Together, these traditions reveal that human beings are not as passive subjects of divine decree but as active agents participating in the pursuit of truth and moral excellence.

The Ethical Core of Islamic Humanism

The concept of human dignity found in the Qur'an is central to the notion of Islamic Humanism. In particular, ***Qur'an 17:70*** states "***We have certainly honoured the Children of Adam…***"[3] illustrating that all humans are created to be respected regardless of their position or race or what religion they adhere to; that is the basis of the statement that every human being has an inherent dignity.

The example set forth by ***Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)*** when he delivered his Farewell Sermon reinforces this value of dignity. In it, he stated, "***O people, your***

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[1] Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 3–5.

[2] Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 59–62.

[3] Qur'an 17:70–76, accessed December 5, 2025. https://legacy.quran.com/17/70-76?utm_source .

Lord is one and your father Adam is one. There is no favor of an Arab over a foreigner, nor a foreigner over an Arab, and neither white skin over black skin, nor black skin over white skin, except by righteousness" [4] . This clearly demonstrates that all humans, Arabs and non-Arabs, are equal and should be treated as such.

Islamic Ethics, based on three values: عدل (justice), رحمة (compassion), and احسان (excellence) places an individual's moral responsibility as the key element to how one acts within the framework of agency. Rather than being determined by external factors, the view of the انسان (human) in Islam is as a moral agent that has been provided عقل (rationale) and اختيار (free-will) to justify his actions and be accountable before God.[5]

This ethical perspective is theological but has created the foundations for the development of Islamic legal (فقه), political, and social thought, with the basic tenets of justice and honour present in very early Islamic models of governance, establishing charitable institutions (وقف) and protecting minority rights.

Reason and Rationalism in the Islamic Intellectual Tradition

For centuries it has been established that in the Muslim world reason (عقل) does not oppose faith; it complements faith.[6] The writings of both Abu Nasr Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) exemplify this combination of philosophy and religion and provide the basis for the development of Muslim humanism. This new form of humanism combines metaphysics with ethics and spirituality.

Al-Farabi

Known as the *"Second Teacher"* after Aristotle, Al-Farabi created a vision where reason and revelation could coexist and benefit each other.[7] In his work **Al-Madina al-Fadila** (The Virtuous City) he stated that the ideal society would be governed by a philosopher-prophet who brings together rational insight with divine guidance. For Al-Farabi, happiness (سعادة) - the ultimate goal of human life - can be attained only by developing both intellectual virtues and moral character. [8] He divided knowledge into theoretical and practical, using logic as the base of every discipline. His epistemological view was that truth is accessible through disciplined reasoning, and that philosophy is not separate from religion, but the highest form of

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[4] Musnad Ahmad. 23489. "Ya Ayyuha An-Nās, 'lā faḍl li'Arabī 'alā ʿAjmī…, 'illā bittaqwā." Reported by Abū Nadrah (on the middle day of the days of Tashriq), from the sermon of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

[5] Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 89–92.

[6] Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 134–36.

[7] Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Al-Madīna al-Fāḍila*, ed. Albert N. Nader (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1986), 15–20.

[8] Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 112–15.

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expression of religion.[9] As noted by Rahim Acar, Al-Farabi "clearly distinguished between the independent intellectual aspects of practical philosophy and the religious sciences, but saw their ultimate convergence in the pursuit of truth and justice".

Ibn Sina

The philosopher Ibn Sina created an entire way of thinking about the universe and mankind using the ideas of both Al-Farabi and others to create his own system, which included as part of its basis logic as taught by Aristotle, metaphysics as developed by the Neoplatonists, and a theological framework based upon the Islamic tradition.[10] Ibn Sina's primary work, ***Kitāb al-Shifā'***, encompassed a broad spectrum of disciplines (logic, natural sciences, mathematics and metaphysics) and served as the foundation for both Islamic and European schools of thought that emerged from the Renaissance through the Middle Ages.[11]

Ibn Sina's philosophy of humanity was founded upon his concept of the rational soul (al-nafs al-nātiqa), which he believed was the source of our ability to act ethically. Through the process of developing our intellects by engaging in disciplined reasoning and developing our ethical sensibilities, Ibn Sina believed that people could evolve toward attaining divine knowledge through a combination of philosophizing and mysticism.[12] While Al-Farabi saw philosophical thought as an independent body of knowledge, Ibn Sina viewed philosophical thought as being partially covered by Islamic law and thought, thus reflecting a more comprehensive understanding of reason and revelation.[13]

We can learn a great deal about both Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina, as they are examples of the pinnacle of merging Faith and Reason. They both indicate that rational investigation is necessary to attain the highest levels of human capabilities, and their works clearly demonstrate that ethical reasoning, political justice, and metaphysical contemplation are not simply secular areas of study, but also have value from a spiritual perspective. The works of Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina represent an early example of the islamic rationalist tradition, and have had a significant impact on the intellectual developments of future Muslim scholars (Ibn Rushd) as well as the emergence of the European Renaissance through the translation of their

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[9] Rahim Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation: Avicenna's and al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Use of Religious Terms* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 45–48.

[10] Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 45–52.

[11] Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Shifāʾ*, pt. 1, logic (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-ʿArabī, 1960), 1:15–25.

[12] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 210–215.

[13] Rahim Acar, *Talking about God and Talking about Creation: Avicenna's and al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Use of Religious Terms* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 67–72.

works into Latin. Additionally, they both provide a humanist model founded on Islamic teachings by stating that seeking knowledge is a religious responsibility, and that using rational thought is a way to worship.

The Humanizing Power of Poetry in the Islamic Tradition

From Islamic traditions and using different cultures from the local environment as influences, a new way of composing poetry grew in the rapidly growing Arab Caliphate.[14] Poetry became an important means of expressing and sharing the views of Islam on human dignity, and in many instances poetry expressed how Islam viewed the idea of human dignity in terms of compassion, self-reflection, and the unity of all humans on the planet. With borders being blurred by caliphate expansion, reaching different cultures, more and more people integrated with the entire islamic world, and brought new poetry traditions. Renowned poets Al-Mutanabbi, Rumi and Saadi are prominent individuals of the new poetry tradition.

Al-Mutanabbi

Al-Mutanabbi, widely regarded as one of the greatest Arabic poets. He wrote poems that asserted one's sense of dignity, pride in intellect, and courage in facing life, as well as gave expression to humanism and other philosophical thoughts.[15] The poet's style included many political comments and insights about life, but he was fundamentally a humanist at heart. In his writings he emphasized personal growth, developing one's skills to articulate one's views, and becoming the best you can be at what you do. One of his famous lines is: ***"If a lion shows its teeth, do not think that it is smiling"***, and this line captures his philosophy of self-determination by using intelligence and strength to determine the direction of one's destiny.[16]

Rumi and Saadi

Through their poetic works, Jalal ad-Din Rumi and Saadi Shirazi express their belief in Islamic humanism. Both poets view the human being as having moral, spiritual, and social responsibility.[17] In addition, through literature these poets wish to create awareness, elevate culture, and resist both dogma and injustice. Rumi's ***"Masnavi Manavi"*** has been called a "paradise of hearts" and has been referred to as a "Qur'an in Persian."[18] It draws from theology, law, hadiths (traditions about the

[14] Roger Allen, *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 251–255.

[15] Ahmad Majali, "Al-Mutanabbi's Linguistic Mastery," *Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum* 2, no. 1 (2023): 88–95.

[16] Margaret Smith, *Readings from the Masters: Al-Mutanabbi* (London: Luzac, 1970), 89–92.

[17] Hamaneh Sohrabi, "Homology of Love Themes in Rumi and Saadi," *Journal of Linguistic and Literary Research* 9, no. 2 (2022): 8–12.

[18] Reynold A. Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic, 1207-1273* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 67–72.

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life of Muhammad and his companions), and philosophy to develop a culture of tolerance, humility, and divine love. Rumi's parable of Moses and the shepherd critiques the formality of religious practices and teaches that true sincerity of heart is more important than strictly adhering to a ritual practice. God chastises Moses for not allowing the shepherd's simple and sincere prayer to be voiced, and tells Moses that the goal of prophethood is "union, rather than alienation."[19] Rumi's Humanism is based on horizontal ethics, that is to reject spiritual elitism, while appreciating the divine spark in every individual. His concept of love and tolerance provides a spiritual framework for encouraging intercultural dialogue, ethical coexistence, and the development of a global community.[20]

When compared to other great Persian poets Saadi's approach places humanism within the framework of justice and gender ethics.[21] His works, including the **"Gulistān"** and the **"Bustaan"**, contain numerous parables illustrating the concepts of hypocrisy and humility, while promoting the dignity of those who may not have the same rights as others. As evidence of his universal ethical perspective upon shared humanity:

"Human beings are members of a whole	''بنی آدم اعضای یکدیگرند
In creation of one essence and soul	که در آفرینش ز یک گوهرند
If one member is afflicted with pain	چو عضوی به درد آورد روزگار
Other members uneasy will remain	دگر عضوها را نماند قرار
If you have no sympathy for human pain	تو کز محنت دیگران بی غمی
The name of human you cannot retain"[22]	نشاید که نامت نهند آدمی''

From "Gulistan", Chapter 1

This poem is carved above the entrance to the United Nations Hall of Nations and embodies Saadi's belief that empathy is the root of all civilisations.[23] Gholi points out that Saadi's belief in humanity is connected to his appreciation for women, his opposition to the idea that men are entitled to rule women, and his respect for those who have the courage to stand up against social injustice. He

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[19] Hamaneh Sohrabi, "Homology or Alteration of Lover and Beloved in Rumi and Saadi," *Journal of Linguistic and Literary Research* 9, no. 2 (2022): 5–10.

[20] Javād Nurbakhsh, "Rumi and Whitman: Universal Brotherhood," *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 19, no. 2 (2022): 112–120.

[21] K. Kamali Sarvestani and F. Niyazkar, "Aesthetic Linguistic Devices in Saadi's Ghazals," *Literary Language Research Journal* 3, no. 9 (2025): 92–98.

[22] Quote by Saadi: "Human beings are members of a whole In creation..."

[23] Joobin Bekhrad, "A 13th-Century Persian Poet's Lessons for Today," *BBC Culture*, June 22, 2020.

envisions a world that is chartered by virtues such as humanness, beauty, honesty, and peace.[24]

Along with their commonality, Rumi and Saadi demonstrate how Islamic poetry serves as a moral guide for the entire world and provides an environment where reasoning, ethics, and faith can be united creatively rather than being contradicting forces. Their poetry is viewed as an aspirational vision of human dignity that transcends time, place, and ideology.

Al-Ghazali: Humanism Through Faith and Moral Agency

In the 11th Century, Al-Ghazali was one of the most important figures to shape Islam's intellectual and spiritual heritage by synthesising faith, morality and humanity. Through his writings, Al-Ghazali shows that he had a deep faith in God along with a great concern for the moral and intellectual potential of each individual.[25] In *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), Al-Ghazali shows us that we are moral agents who have reason (عقل) and a choice (اختيار) and are responsible for our choices. The affirmation of our moral agency is a reflection of Al-Ghazali's concern with human dignity and responsibility and positions us as active participants in the pursuit of truth and virtue.[26]

Al-Ghazali's views on moral agency and debates show that he had a humanistic perspective; his rejection of deterministic perspectives such as those that deny people are responsible for their own actions by insisting that ethical accountability provides dignity and meaning for the lives of individuals, and that ethical accountability offers unity to faith and ethics through his belief that all humans are given the ability to distinguish right from wrong. His view on ethical accountability was not a religious duty but also humanistic, and it should be pursued by way of justice and excellence in society.[27]

Al-Ghazali shows that, contrary to common misconceptions, Islamic humanism is not a secular form of humanism; rather, it is a faith-based humanism in which human dignity, moral responsibility and the acquisition of knowledge are held in high regard through the integration of reason and revelation.[28] Furthermore, Al-Ghazali's legacy provides a basis for ongoing discussions regarding the possible coexistence of faith and humanism as complementary and mutually beneficial paths to the truth and to human thriving.

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[24] Hamaneh Sohrabi, "Gender Ethics in Classical Persian Poetry: Saadi's Perspective," *Journal of Linguistic and Literary Research* 10, no. 1 (2023): 45–52.

[25] Eric Ormsby, *Ghazālī: The Revival of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 45–52.

[26] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 2005), 45–50.

[27] Ahmad Poya, "Al-Ghazali's Theory of Real Knowledge: An Exploration of Integration Features," *International Journal of Humanities, Education, Science and Society* 3, no. 10 (2023): 1–15.

[28] How Al-Ghazali Shaped Islamic Thought and Philosophy," *Singapore Sedekah*, December 31, 2023.

Humanism and the Pursuit of Knowledge

The Islamic view of علم (knowledge) was not just intellectual; it was also spiritual obligation and social duty. The hadith states "طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ ـ *Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim*", which represents the egalitarian and universal aspirations of learning.[29] This obligation was genderless, inclusive of all ethnicities, and endorsed equal opportunity for all people, rather than a privilege of those in power.

The Islamic world was not limited to studying religious subjects; rather, it studied every type of knowledge. For example, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, literature, arts and music were all considered useful tools to better understand how God created the universe and to help improve life on Earth.[30]

Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad, and Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez were vibrant institutions for learning across many disciplines where the best minds of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism came together to translate, preserve and build on their common heritage of knowledge.[31] This collaborative effort was a reflection of the deeply humanistic culture of these times, which encouraged inquiry, critical thinking, and development of the intellect as a form of worship and ethical growth.[32] In these cultures, knowledge was not pursued solely for its own sake or to advance one's own power; rather, it was pursued as a vehicle of elevating the human condition through morals, social justice and spiritual awareness. The scholar was not simply a collector of facts; he was a keeper of wisdom whose purpose was to lead society along the path of truth, compassion and equality.

Conclusion

The Medieval Islamic world created the framework for what we refer to today as "Islamic Humanism", integrating ethics, reason, and faith into a unified framework, rather than viewing them as opposing philosophies. A thorough analysis of the Qur'an and the ethical codes established at the onset of Islam informs us that central to the Islamic tradition of humanism are concepts of human dignity, justice, and moral responsibility. The writings of Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina exemplify the early Islamic perspective that logical reasoning was considered a complementary

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[29] Ibn Mājah. *Sunan Ibn Mājah*. Hadith 224. Darussalam, 2007. https://quranx.com/hadith/IbnMajah/DarusSalam/Volume-1/Book-1/Hadith-224?utm_source
[30] Ibrahim Kalin, "Al-Ghazali and the Search for Knowledge in the Modern World," *Daily Sabah*, February 4, 2017.
[31] Algeriani, Adel Abdul-Aziz, and Mawloud Mohadi. "The House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikmah) and Its Civilizational Impact on Islamic Libraries: A Historical Perspective." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 5 (2017).
[32] The Importance of Knowledge and Work in Islamic Thought," *University of Baghdad Repository* (2024).

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means of attaining spiritual knowledge; thus establishing a pattern of development that tied moral virtue to intellectual advancement. In addition, the poetry of Rumi, Saadi, and Al-Mutanabbi highlights the notion that written forms of expression reinforce concepts of compassion, common humanity, and introspection. The establishment of numerous educational institutions verifies that the community belief was that the pursuit of knowledge constitutes both a spiritual responsibility and social obligation. Similarly, through the work of Al-Ghazali who integrates the principles of reason, faith, and ethical conduct, the Islamic humanism incorporates theological foundations with a strong sense of moral accountability.

These findings collectively indicate that Islamic humanism was a comprehensive intellectual tradition that placed the human being at the center of ethical, philosophical, and educational life. Its continued relevance is evident in modern discussions on social justice, intercultural understanding, and the relationship between science and ethics.

Continued research into the tradition of Islamic humanism is necessary to better understand additional thinkers and local variances as well as examine how this body of knowledge may address questions currently facing humanity. Ongoing research will increase our ability to comprehend the historical development of the Islamic humanist tradition, and allow a deeper appreciation for how its tenets are applicable to modern ethical discourse.

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