



UNIT 2: FOUNDATIONS & PRINCIPLES OF PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

**THE PROGRESSIVE ISLAM
CURRICULUM FOR ADULTS**

**PREPARED & PRODUCED
BY MUSLIMS FOR
PROGRESSIVE VALUES**

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Foundation

WHY A PROGRESSIVE ISLAM CURRICULUM FOR ADULTS?

Founded in 2007, Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) is the oldest progressive Muslims nonprofit in the United States. Our mission is to advocate for human rights, social justice and inclusion in the United States and around the world by inculcating a culture rooted in human rights through public education,

advocacy, and the arts. Recognizing that the only way to return the practice of Islam to a truly traditional one, one that is rooted in social justice, compassion, and pluralism, we have sought out to produce educational resources for the general public to learn from. It is our belief that progressive interpretations of Islam should be as accessible as possible but for far too long, these interpretations have remained in scholarly and theological texts. The Progressive Islam Curriculum, generously funded by the A&A Foundation, is a culmination of MPV's to increase accessibility of these progressive interpretations so that the general Muslim population has the tools to understand and practice the truly traditional form Islam.



LESSON 1: INTRODUCTION TO PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

Progressive Islam, as we speak of it today, is a relatively new term but the values and beliefs with which progressive Muslims associate and the spiritual basis for these values and beliefs go back to the early days of Islam. Scholars of Islam, and progressive Islam in particular, have offered a number of different definitions to explain what progressive Islam is but at the heart of this movement is the idea that every human has the same intrinsic worth and that the true measure of how moral a person is, particularly a Muslim, has little to do with ritual practice and everything to do with how they serve their fellow humans.

The basis for this treatment rests in values and themes that scholars have identified as core to the practice of Progressive Islam. Numerous scholars of Islam have sought to define progressive Islam and the values and beliefs associated with those who identify as a progressive Muslim but for the sake of brevity, we have selected definitions from two of the most renowned scholars of progressive Islam: Omid Safi and Adis Duderija.

“VISION AND ACTIVISM ARE BOTH NECESSARY. ACTIVISM WITHOUT VISION IS DOOMED FROM THE START. VISION WITHOUT ACTIVISM QUICKLY BECOMES IRRELEVANT”

OMID SAFI

Omid Safi, an Iranian scholar of Islam, teaches and conducts his research at Duke University in North Carolina, primarily focusing on Sufism, contemporary Islamic thought, Islamic history, and progressive Islam. According to Safi

“Progressive Islam encompasses a number of themes: striving to realize a just and pluralistic society through a critical engagement with Islam, a relentless pursuit of social justice, an emphasis on gender equality as a foundation of human rights, and a vision of religious and ethnic pluralism.”

In addition to these four key themes - a just and pluralistic society, the pursuit of social justice, an emphasis on gender equality as a foundation of human rights, and religious and ethnic pluralism, Safi defines progressive Muslims as being committed to the idea that *“the worth of a human being is measured by a person’s character, not the oil under their soil, and not their flag.”*

According to Safi the deployment of “progressive” before the identification of Muslim simply implies that this individual strives towards a “universal notion of justice in which no single community’s prosperity, righteousness, and dignity comes at the expense of another.” Another core element in Safi’s definition of progressive Islam is the importance of interpreting Islamic texts, particularly the Qur’an, for the 21st century and the problems and solutions that these contemporary times ask Muslims to confront. For Safi though, the concept of a 21st century Islam is not one that directly aligns itself with the human rights values that are associated with the West and the institutions and systems that have been built as a result of Western dominance, particularly in international human rights spaces. This ability to condemn Western modernity and the hegemony associated with the West’s export of its moral superiority complex is what separates progressive Islam from the Islam’s modernity movement, which rose to prominence in the late 19th century, a movement that we’ll cover in the next section. However, progressive Muslims, as the name implies, often stand in contrast to the more traditionalist Muslims who tend to dominate Islamic scholarship, mosques, political systems, and the media in both Muslim majority countries and the West.

Where then do progressive Muslims fit in if not with the traditionalists or the modernists? According to Safi, progressive Muslims must strive to learn from the shortcomings associated with each of these ideologies, not to find the perfect middle ground that will unite all Muslims but to “create a safe, open, and dynamic space, where guided by concerns for global justice and pluralism, we can have critical conversations about Islamic tradition in light of modernity.”

Adis Duderija is an Australian-Bosnian scholar of Islam based out of Griffith University in Australia whose academic work and research focuses on contemporary Islam, particularly Progressive Islam, Islam and gender, religious extremism and the identity of Western Muslims. Duderija’s definition of a progressive Muslim is someone

“...who seriously and critically engages with the full spectrum of the Islamic tradition (turāth), and considers Islam not just as a matter of individual or private belief, but as having profound relevance in the political arena – but only in accordance with the above principles (cosmopolitan, democratic, committed to human rights and gender equality, invested in a vibrant civil society).”

According to Duderija, the specific themes that progressive Muslims must incorporate into their belief systems to qualify them as “progressive” are (1) a critical position against the hegemonic, economic, political, social, and cultural forces from the Global North, (2) a critical position against patriarchal exclusivity, (3) critical positions against the values underpinning both Enlightenment and modernity, and (4) the ability to challenge neotraditional Islamic discourse and Western centric concepts. For Duderija, these themes along with specific theological, moral, and ethical principles guide the actions of those who identify as Muslim and, specifically as progressive believers of Islam. It is these ethics of responsibility that

guide progressive Muslims to act justly and fight for equality “even if it is against their own self-interests”. Justice as a value that is inherent to progressive Islam is vital for Duderija, who prioritizes liberation theology, a theology that condemns the legacy of colonialism and the gap between the rich and poor, which we’ll cover in lesson 4. For Duderija, progressive Islam is not simply a theoretical understanding of a religion but as a way to fundamentally reform social, economic, and political systems in Muslim countries and across Muslim communities.

As stated earlier, these are just definitions from two of the many scholars who have sought to define progressive Islam over the years. The works of other scholars of progressive Islam, including amina wadud, Kecia Ali, Asma Barlas, Khaled Abou El Fadl, and Ziba Mir Hosseini, will be featured throughout the curriculum as we marry their scholarship with the practices of progressive Islam. It is also important to note that with everything in life, especially religious beliefs, progressive Islamic beliefs exist on a scale and all individuals who identify as a progressive Muslim have an independent set of beliefs that suits their relationship with God and their understanding of the word of God. While these values vary, there are a few specific ways of understanding Islam that are inherent to progressive Islam: *tawhid*, multiple critique, a commitment to the real world implications of implementing a progressive form of Islam, and the prophetic traditions of social justice and independent thinking in Islam. Each of these themes will present themselves repeatedly throughout the curriculum but we’ll cover them briefly in this section to establish a baseline understanding of these themes.

Tawhid, is the most important belief in Islam in which all other values and beliefs themselves are centered. Therefore *tawhid*, or monotheism, is a core part of interpreting Islamic texts and practicing Islam. At the heart of *tawhid* is the premise that divinity and all that is divine is accorded to the one God and Them alone. To worship or attribute any divine aspects to a human for any reason, whether it be because of their authority or their gender, is considered *shirk*, an unpardonable sin. For progressive Muslims, this understanding of *tawhid* demands gender equality in all societal systems and the removal of hierarchical systems, particularly when it comes to accessing Islamic scholarship and interpretations of the divine.

MULTIPLE CRITIQUE

Multiple critique is a scholarly approach used to engage with and criticize individuals, institutions and systems that limit and oppress people. This approach is different from how we typically understand an activist or academic critique as it engages in criticism of all forms of oppression, both inside and outside of that individuals’ community. One example of using multiple critique is for a Muslim to criticize Muslim men who say that according to Islam, women and men are not equal and also to criticize stereotypes in the West that claim that Muslim women cannot be feminist or that Islam is an inherently patriarchal religion.

When engaging in multiple critique, progressive Muslims base their assertions on interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith from a standpoint of social justice. Social justice serves as the baseline for these interpretations because according to progressive Muslims, Islam is inherently a progressive religion oriented around social justice and the universality of rights to which all humans are endowed. This precedent of challenging systems that oppress individuals and communities is deeply rooted in the Qur'an, which references the *mustad'afun*, or the oppressed individuals of all backgrounds and calls on all believers to protect and empower people who are facing oppression.

At the heart of progressive Islam is the belief that Islam is not simply a religion that denotes a relationship between an individual and God but one that also has real world implications to better transform the world and the lives of people around us. For progressive Muslims, Islam is not a religion that can be segmented into progressive and traditional, rather Islam is inherently a progressive religion when accurately interpreted and in accordance with the principles of the early ummah.

Progressive Muslims therefore do not measure their success in new theology or the identification of new theories but rather actual change on the ground level. For example, progressive and accurate interpretations of Islam offer the opportunity to redo an economic system to ensure wealth is equitably distributed across society. Recasting Islamic politics to align with Islamic liberation theology presents the chance for societies to engage with both tradition and modernity while striving for justice. These opportunities for real world transformation demonstrate how progressive Muslims interpret the concept of jihad - as a responsibility for all Muslims to engage with the social order to fight inequality and injustice.

This last concept, the continued pursuit of justice in society is a hallmark of progressive Islam and one that is found in the prophetic traditions of Islam. Progressive Muslims often refer to the Islamic traditions of the Prophet Abraham and Prophet Muhammad both who challenged the injustice and inequality in their own communities. In the traditions of the early ummah, particularly during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad and his companions, in addition to the pursuit of social justice, we also see the constant prioritization of education, the sciences, rational thought, and *ijtihad*.

For example, a recorded Hadith tells of a conversation between the Prophet and his companion, Mu'adh ibn Jabal. In the conversation, Mu'adh stated that if he found no explicit guidance in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, he would rely on his own independent reasoning, which God gave him to utilize. For progressive Muslims, these early references to social justice and rational thought affirm the belief that Islam is inherently progressive and that progressive interpretations are not innovation or sinful but rather a return to the early interpretations of Islam.

LESSON 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

While progressive Muslims believe that Islam is itself an inherently progressive religion, we must recognize that it has not always been interpreted in progressive or accurate ways. In fact, for much of its history, the dominant form of Islam's beliefs and practices have been a traditionalist form, which began during the time of the Asharites, whose traditional interpretation of Islam took hold and prioritized literal interpretations of the Qur'an over rational interpretations. Despite the Asharite dominance of Islamic jurisprudence, there is a long tradition in Islamic history of communities, philosophers, religious teachers, and political leaders pushing back against this traditionalist narrative in favor of a more rational and inclusive form of Islam. In this section, we'll highlight these individuals and movements whose interpretations and advocacy contributed to the progressive Islam movement that we know of today.

Perhaps the most famous of these individuals, at least in the realm of Islamic philosophy, is Ibn Rushd, or Averroes, a 12th century Andalusian philosopher who is known as the father of secular thought in Islam. Active during the Islamic Golden Age, Ibn Rushd authored pieces on politics, medicine, ethics, and astronomy, pieces that would later become the foundation of post classical European thought. During a time when philosophy was under attack, particularly by prominent Islamic figures like Al-Ghazali who claimed philosophers were non-Islamic, Ibn Rushd argued that philosophy and rational thinking were core to religious interpretation. He believed that philosophy, like Islam, was another way of reaching the truth and that there was no contradiction between philosophy and religion. Ibn Rush also believed that the Qur'an encouraged individuals to be philosophers and that reflecting on the world and word of God allowed Muslims to develop a better understanding of and relationship with God. This emphasis on self-reflection and individual interpretation aligns with Ibn Rushd's understanding that differences in interpretation of Islamic texts would always exist. Despite his assertions that these differences were inevitable, beginning in the 16th century the door to ijtihad, or independent interpretation of Islamic texts, was essentially closed. That is until the late 19th century with the birth of the Islamic modernist movement.

Modernism in Islam began with two movements during the mid 19th century, the Tanzimat movement in the Ottoman Empire and the Salafiyya movement, which emerged in the mid

19th century in Syria. The Tanzimat movement sought to harmonize Islamic theological concepts with liberal ideas about democracy and political system, ideas that were imported from Europe but which the movement's leaders asserted had their roots in the Islamic Golden Age. The Salafiyya movement took a similar socio-political stance as the Tanzimats but ultimately disagreed with the secular nature of their movement and their particular affinity for so-called European thoughts and philosophy. The Salafiyya movement also put a greater emphasis on the generation of Muslims who lived with and immediately after the Prophet, or the al-salaf al-salih. These two movements initiated the spread of modernism throughout the Islamic world, which at the time was experiencing the violence and oppression of European colonialism and imperialism.

TANZIMAT MOVEMENT

- Series of government sponsored reforms that took place in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 - 1876.
- Sought to shift the state from a theocratic empire to a modern and democratic state.
- The reforms were established in the Noble Edict of the Rose Chamber.
- Reforms included a secular school system, new commercial and criminal laws administered by courts independent of the ulama, new methods of military conscription, equality for non-Muslims, and a guarantee of rights to property, life, and honor regardless of religion or race.
- Implemented alongside Sultan Abdulhamid II's Pan-Islam movement, which sought to prevent Western intervention in the Ottoman Empire.
- Ultimately came to an end after the Sultan consolidated all authority and power, corrupting the reform movement.

SALAFIYYA MOVEMENT

- Originating in Syria, it spread with the help of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, who advocate for an independent analysis of the Qur'an and Sunnah.
- Emphasized the importance of ijtiḥad and the rejection of taqlid (adherence to established precedents).
- Prioritized the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, particularly Hadith recorded by the first three generations of Muslims.
- Sought to make Islam a dynamic force in the modern world.
- Emphasized Islam's compatibility with rational thought and science on the basis of tawḥid, or the unity of God.
- Metamorphosed by the late 19th century to represent an Islamic revivalism movement that continued to prioritize a return to the faith of the early ancestors however, through military jihad rather than intellectual effort and reform.

There was, within the modernist movement, a general acknowledgement that Muslim societies were on the decline in comparison to European societies at the time. Modernists blamed both a lack of natural sciences and incorporation of philosophy in Islamic societies but also Western imperialism and the violence and destruction associated with being subjects of colonial empires. Modernists' relationship with the West and with Western ideals is not an easy thing to understand as it differed between movements and individuals. Some movements, like Ittifaq-i Hamiyet, or the Patriotic Alliance, sought to introduce Western values into Muslim societies. Others led by those like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani initially supported the British and their imperialism in Muslim countries before shifting his stance to oppose imperialism, claiming that Muslims must be nationalized and politically active rather than submissive to foreign domination. Others claimed that the values the modernist movement sought to introduce to Muslim societies, like democracy, equality, progressive, and human and civil rights, values considered by many to have originated in the European enlightenment that would not exist without Islam, as they were derived from the Islamic Golden Age and the different advancements associated with this time period.

Despite these differences, the diverse modernity movements of the 19th century shared certain core values that have influenced Islamic movements and theology to this day. The contemporary definition of the movement, according to Mustafa Akyol, highlights the general consensus of the movements as *"an effort to re-read Islam's fundamental sources - the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the practice of the Prophet) - by placing them in their historical context and then reinterpreting them, non-literally in the light of the modern context"*. In simpler terms, these movements attempted to interpret Islam so that it was relevant to the changing world around Muslims, particularly in the context of democratic institutions, while also incorporating Islam and faith into various public institutions. The latter, the incorporation of faith into public institutions, is what separates the Islamic modernist movement from secular movements, while the former denotes the modernity of the movement as opposed to more traditional Islamic movements. It is important to note that while the modernist movements sought to incorporate so-called "Western Values" into their communities, they used a selective approach to selecting enlightenment values so as to ensure that this "Western" culture didn't replace Islamic culture or heritage. Instead, these scholars sought to reconcile Islamic values with these enlightenment values on the premise that many values associated with the enlightenment were actually inspired by reforms and principles that were born from the Islamic Golden Age.

In addition to reincorporating these "modern" values into Islamic traditions, the modernist movement also sought to transform how Muslims engaged with the sacred texts of Islam. For example, the interpretations of the Hadith were limited to include only authentic Sunnah, which significantly limited the emphasis on following Hadith as a part of religious practice. In doing so, the modernists prioritized the Qur'an above all else as the primary instruction for Islamic teachings and practices. Additionally, the modernists utilized reason as the basis for interpreting the Qur'an and the authentic Hadith, refuting the traditionalists literal translation and interpretation of Islamic texts. When various issues arose that were not addressed in

classical commentaries, modernists used the principles of maqasid al-Sharia and maslahah mursalah to understand how to confront and handle these various issues.

CORE ASPECTS OF THE MODERNITY MOVEMENT

- Adaptation of Islamic law according to current political and social revolutions
- Deployment of ijihad to determine legal decisions that were not mentioned in the Qur'an and also for independent thought and reasoning in all areas of society
- Invoked maqasid al-sharia to address political and ethical concerns
- Restricted Islamic law to be based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which was limited to include only the most authentic Hadith
- Reinterpret the Qur'an and Hadith to transform ijma (consensus of the Muslim community) and qiya (juristic reasoning)
- Used these new interpretations to reconsider the acceptability of specific aspects of Islamic text that conflicted with the values drawn from the Qur'an including polygamy, a violent interpretation of jihad, penal punishments, women's rights and interfaith relations.

Despite the strength and breadth of the modernist movement across the Muslim world in the late 19th century and early 20th century, the movement ultimately met its decline in conjunction with the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Although the movement itself was weakened, the modernist ideals and core beliefs served as the basis for a number of powerful and influential movements in the Muslim world today. Certain Political Islamic movements arose from the modernist movement, inspired by the nationalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric that some of its leaders espoused. Other organizations, like the Muslim Brotherhood, were influenced by the modernist movement's emphasis on the purest interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith but rejected the movement's alignment with Western countries and their principles. The Progressive Islam movement itself has roots in the modernist movement with its emphasis on rational thinking. However, the progressive Islam movement is not in itself a continuation of the modernist movement as many scholars of the progressive movement criticize the modernists for their alleged deification of Eurocentric values and their attempt to duplicate Western systems in Muslim communities.

Here we see the importance of the progressive movement's use of multiple critique, as the movement criticizes both Western-centric movements and Islamic fundamentalism. Progressive Islam's final critique of the modernist movement is that they relied far too much on scholarship and theory rather than the application of the scholarship to improve the well being of Muslim societies.. Despite these critiques though, certain aspects of the modernist philosophy remain deeply rooted in the progressive Islam movement today, most importantly perhaps the use of maqasid al-Shariah and the emphasis on the importance of ijihad.

LESSON 3: IJTIHAD

The definition of the term ijihad has evolved multiple times over the centuries along with its use and acceptability in Islamic jurisprudence. The term itself comes from the root jhd (jahada or jahdua). In early Islamic history, ijihad referred to the process that early Muslim jurists would use to reach legal rulings and address various social issues. Although the term itself is not mentioned in the Qur'an, the practice of exercising effort for the sake of knowledge and legal conclusions has precedence in both the Qur'an and the Hadith.

A statement attributed to Amr ibn al-'As states,

"If a ruler issues a judgment based on an effort to arrive at the truth, and if his judgment is correct, he will receive two rewards. If, on the other hand, his judgment is incorrect, he will receive one reward."

Commenting on this statement in Ma'ālim al-Sunan wrote,

"The ruler whose judgment is mistaken is still rewarded, because his effort to arrive at truth is a form of worship. He is not rewarded for the mistake, but neither does he incur any guilt on account of it."

Ijihad was originally practiced by mujtahids, or Islamic scholars who met the following requirements: knowledge of the Qur'an, Sunnah, Arabic, and legal theory. These qualified jurists developed the practice in order to better understand the Qur'an and apply their understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah to determine the answers to various questions and problems that were not directly addressed in Islam's holy text. Initially, all qualified jurists had the right to exercise this original thinking for the sake of legal determinations. These qualified scholars based their determinations on reason, deduction, and prioritization, considered times, place, norms, and prevailing conditions. An example rational decision making or ijihad, made by Caliph Omar during his

ORIGINAL REQUIREMENTS TO PRACTICE IJTIHAD

- Fluency in the Arabic language and its grammar.
- Extensive knowledge of the Qur'an and Hadith.
- Expertise in legal theory (Usul al-fiqh).

reign over the caliphate is exemplified below:

During his reign in the 7th century, Caliph Omar ceased to utilize the punishment of cutting off the hands of thieves even though it contradicted a verse in the Qur'an. His justification reached using *ijtihad* was that people were often stealing out of hunger, poverty, and environmental conditions that led to drought. For the Caliph, given that the precondition of a truly Islamic society was not established, the Quranic principles of justice and fairness took precedence over a singular verse in the Qur'an.

However, during the Abbasid period (750 - 1258), different legal schools of thought (*madhab*) and its jurists were established. For many, this limitation of interpretations to four prominent scholars - Malik, Hanafi, Shafii, and Hambal, is considered a political decision by the Abbasid powers to keep the doors of *ijtihad* closed, consolidating their political power.

THE FOUR MADHAB OF SUNNI ISLAM

MALIK

Form *ijma* through the agreement of the first Muslim residents of Medina.

HANAFI

From *ijma* through public agreement of the Islamic jurists .

SHAFI

Form *ijma* through the agreement of the community and public at large.

HANBALI

Form *ijma* through the agreement and practices of the Prophet's companions.

Jurists of the established schools of thought were constrained in their *ijtihad*, resulting in a standardized edict called *usl al-fiqh*. By the 16th century, *ijtihad* essentially ceased to exist and was instead replaced by *taqlid*, which denotes an individual's conformity to the teaching of another person. These limitations on the practice of *ijtihad* remained in place into the 20th century for political reasons, in part in response to the growing influence of Western powers in the way the Sharia court system adjudicated, thus codifying centuries old *mazhabs*.

Into the 21st century the door to *ijtihad* has remained closed. This is a political decision by authoritarian Muslims governments today, which allows them to control scholars, limit freedom of expression, and dictate a state definition of Islam. Over the centuries though, there have been revivalist movements, which have sought to normalize *ijtihad* by either

pening the door of ijthad to all or increasing the number of individuals qualified to practice ijthad. The modernist movement, covered in the previous lesson, was perhaps the most significant of these movements. At the height of this movement, Jamaluddin Afghani, Mohammed Abduh, and Mohammad Iqbal, famous revivalists thinkers of the 19th century, sought to increase accessibility to ijthad. In particular, they highlighted the importance of the practice by expanding the definition of the term to mean critical and independent reasoning for all domains of thought.

Today, ijthad is also a core part of the progressive Islam movement, with progressive Muslims claiming that taqlid, the process normalized nearly 500 years ago, simply constitutes blind following, which itself is un-Islamic. For progressive Muslims, the blind following of older interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah cripples Islamic thought and confuses Muslim societies by attempting to apply a one size fits all method of interpretation to diverse societies with modern problems.

Rather than apply this one size fits all method, progressive Muslims argue that the door to ijthad should be reopened because it allows individuals to constantly search for the truth on their own because according to Islam, no singular human has a monopoly on the truth. This pursuit of knowledge pays homage to human reason and the pursuit of human intellect, which is a critical part of the Quranic message and essential aspect of being a practicing Muslim.

DO THEY NOT PONDER ABOUT THE QUR'AN? HAD IT BEEN FROM ANY OTHER THAN ALLAH, THEY WOULD SURELY HAVE FOUND IN IT MUCH INCONSISTENCY.

QUR'AN 4:82

Rather than blindly following the interpretation of another individual or jurists of centuries ago, progressive Muslims use ijthad to reinterpret Islamic texts for the 21st century, particularly of issues for Muslims in the West. In short, the importance of ijthad for progressive Muslims lies in using the wisdom of the past rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah in a way that fits our modern dilemmas.

LESSON 4: LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

To better understand progressive interpretations of Islam, it is essential to understand Liberation Theology and how one can incorporate this philosophy into their religious practice. Liberation theology is defined by the Encyclopedia of Religion as “a critical reflection on the historical praxis of liberation in a concrete situation of oppression and discrimination”. In simpler terms, liberation theology is a method of interpreting scripture from the perspective of oppressed people in order to engage in the struggle to improve the lives of the underprivileged, underserved, and marginalized.

Core to interpreting religious scripture in this way is understanding God’s word as demanding that believers must struggle for human wellbeing in addition to our pursuit of spiritual health and wellbeing. Intersectionality is also at the heart of the implementation of this theology, which means to practice liberation theology is to address oppression at various levels, including gender, socioeconomic status, geographic location, race, class, and religion.

As a term, liberation theology was coined by Jesuit Fr. General Pedro Arrupe in 1968, at the advent of a movement in Latin America that tied religious faith, specifically Catholicism, to social justice. This movement that swept through Latin America during the 1960s claimed that unjust socioeconomic structures were sinful and that it was the duty of Catholics to advocate for the poor and politically oppressed through systemic reform rather than simple charity. Although this movement originated in the Catholic faith, similar movements have developed within other religious groups, including movements in the Protestant faith, Black Liberation Theology in the United States, Dalit Liberation Theology in India, and Ireland’s own Catholic Liberation Theology movement.

The term Islam Liberation Theology was coined in the aftermath of this original Latin American based movement but as we have learned throughout this curriculum the concept of standing up for the oppressed is at the root of Islam and has been a central aspect of its religious teaching since it was first introduced centuries ago. Revelations of the Qur’an sought to liberate human beings from suffering, instructing them to redo the social order in a way that emphasized human dignity and equality.

Liberation Theology in the Qur'an

And what is [the matter] with you that you fight not in the cause of Allāh and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children who say, "Our Lord, take us out of this city of oppressive people and appoint for us from Yourself a protector and appoint for us from Yourself a helper. (4:75)

But it was Our Will to favour those who were oppressed in the land, making them models 'of faith' as well as successors (28:5)

For Allah created the heavens and the earth for a purpose, so that every soul may be paid back for what it has committed. And none will be wronged. (45:22)

O believers! Stand firm for Allah and bear true testimony. Do not let the hatred of a people lead you to injustice. Be just! That is closer to righteousness. And be mindful of Allah. Surely Allah is All-Aware of what you do. (5:8)

They 'also' ask you 'O Prophet' what they should donate. Say, "Whatever you can spare." This is how Allah makes His revelations clear to you 'believers', so perhaps you may reflect (2:219)

These teachings, along with the Sunnah, also denounced ignorance and socio-economic injustices that were common in Mecca because of the unjust tribal system of governance. Islam sought to bring people away from these tribal ties, which were the foundation of power and which left so many people without these tribal affiliations powerless in the face of oppression. The presence of liberation theology as core to Islam is further underscored by the persecution that Muslims faced in the early days of Islam. In the face of violent persecution and economic hardships, the early Muslim community remained steadfast in following the Quranic mandate of building a just and egalitarian society as forefront to their religious practice. His understanding of social practices as a form of religious practices did not remain long in the Islamic tradition and was essentially done away with during the 7th century, as the Umayyad Empire established a dynastic rule, eliminating free will and secure social systems that were built upon this free will.

An attempt to restore this interdependent relationship between systemic reform and religious practice has manifested in today's Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT) movement. To distinguish itself as an independent movement within the larger global community, ILT has established specific themes to define its movement and their wider ambitions. This movement seeks to return to these traditions and discourse by calling on progressive theologians and activists to learn from perspectives of the neglected and oppressed rather than attempting to speak on behalf of them or providing basic

charity.

Individuals who subscribe to this theology employ multiple critique to oppose reactionary and ultraconservative Islam as well as oppressive neoliberalism. Critiquing neoliberalism, ILT seeks to raise awareness about the harms that this economic and social model has imposed upon the global community, including restrictive and debilitating economic policies in the Global South, the military industrial complex, and the invasion of Muslim majority countries in the Global South, like Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to these critiques though, ILT has incorporated a number of affirmative positions into its practice, including religious pluralism and gender egalitarianism. Above all, ILT argues that in order to reclaim the word of God in a way that honors Islamic traditions and values, Muslims must translate their religious beliefs into actual practice rather than simple scholarship.

One prominent scholar of Islamic Liberation Theology, Asghar Ali Engineer, has identified the following values as being core to the movement.



For individuals today who seek to put Islamic Liberation Theology into practice, they need only look at the historical precedent set by Muslim movements in the 19th and 20th century. These movements, driven by liberation theology, were in part inspired by the post Cold War world, which saw Western powers aligning themselves with conservative and repressive Muslim regimes to prevent leftist movements from allying themselves with Islamic nationalist movements. Indonesia presents an excellent case study for the dangers that Muslims, using a liberation theory rooted in Islam, posed to Western interests in a region "at risk" of falling to communism. Between 1965 and 1966, an estimated 1,000,000 Indonesians aligned with the country's leftist movement were killed in a genocide carried out by the US backed military with significant support from Islamic groups.

Years later, the US sought to prevent another communist movement from flourishing in Pakistan, where the CIA backed the new Taliban movement to fight the communist movement, which had opened schools for both boys and girls. Today's alliance, between Western powers and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, presents conditions similar to the ones seen in the 20th century, where Western countries are willing to overlook the human rights abuses of militant dictators because of their economic

interests in these countries. These authoritarian regimes often put more emphasis on morality and their political movements than actual social justice issues like poverty, inequality, and lack of educational institutions.

For progressive Muslims, this alliance underscores why integrating liberation theology into their movement is imperative. By including liberation theology into the progressive Islam movement, progressive Muslims affirm that for them, faith is an indispensable part of struggling against oppression and injustice. Liberation theology also ties into two other aspects that drive the progressive Muslim movement - ijtihad and multiple critique. Liberation theology finds mainstream interpretations of theology to be at odds with its values, necessitating a reinterpretation of texts in a way that affirms social justice advocacy as a faith based practice . Liberation Theology also incorporates multiple critique into its principles because it requires individuals to criticize oppression regardless of whether it manifests itself within or outside of the faith.

Ultimately, the moment in which we find ourselves in today demonstrates how essential liberation theory is to the Muslim world today. Incorporating this thinking into our religious practices allows us to address the gap between rich and poor, the legacy of colonialism, the spread of fundamentalism, and the puritanical beliefs that have replaced the compassionate and empowering teachings of the Qur'an.

LESSON 5: THE INTERSECTION OF THEOLOGY & HUMAN RIGHTS

“VISION AND ACTIVISM ARE BOTH NECESSARY. ACTIVISM WITHOUT VISION IS DOOMED FROM THE START. VISION WITHOUT ACTIVISM QUICKLY BECOMES IRRELEVANT”

OMID SAFI

We open Lesson 5 with this quote from Omid Safi shared in Lesson 1 to reiterate the importance of human rights advocacy as it relates to a progressive practice of Islam. For progressive Muslims, the implementation of policies and practices that ensure the promotion of human rights in societies is not only inherently Islamic but imperative to living up to the values shared with Muslims in the Qur’an. But in order to understand this intersection of human rights and Islamic theology, we must first understand these as individual entities.

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights charter defines human rights as rights that are “inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion or any other status.” These rights include civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights and may include but are not limited to freedom of expression, freedom from slavery, the right to life, freedom of religion and belief, the right to bodily autonomy, right to education, and the right to health. As we understand them in the 21st century, human rights provide societies with a framework for addressing different societal issues, including gender equality, social justice, political freedoms, religious freedoms, economic equality, and racial justice.

1400 years ago, the Quran too established its human rights framework. Before understanding human rights from an Islamic perspective, it is important to first address the universal moral values that are core to Islamic belief. These values, justice, dignity and mercy are granted to humans from God and are therefore divine, applying to each creation of God,

regardless of religion and gender, entitling every individual to dignity, moral worth, and moral agency. The values of justice, dignity, and mercy and the divine revelations that accompany these values are the foundation of human rights as we understand them in Islam. Strengthening this foundation is the Islamic principle of unity between God and humankind. This unity means that all individuals are equal in the eyes of God and that all are entitled to the same dignity (*karamah*) that They have bestowed upon humans.

Therefore human rights from an Islamic understanding is not a legal system or specific set of rights that are granted by a specific document written by humans or by a ruler or an institution. They are a set of ethical values laid out by God that Muslims must practice to legitimize their religious practice by acknowledging the absolute equality of all humanity. By understanding human rights from this theological perspective, we see the strength of the Islamic human rights perspective as an absolute right compared to a secular perspective. This is because religion encompasses every aspect of a person's life whereas a basic human rights framework is limited in scope to basic normative political, social, and legal standards.

However, for many individuals both Muslim and non-Muslim, human rights and Islam are not compatible and sometimes at odds with one another. We see this especially when ideological rigidity is practiced and also because of the various interpretations and cultural practices that have been incorporated into a communities' religious practice.

Progressive Muslims however, seek to move away from this ideological rigidity, both in the Muslim and in the Western world, in an effort to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam and human rights. This requires shifting the discourse away from universal human rights, often understood as "Western" and instead focusing on Islamic human rights values from the prism of human dignity, justice, compassion and mercy. When we do this, we find that, both secular and Islamic human rights standards have the same trajectory, utilizing different terms.

According to progressive Muslims, this compatibility is based on the concept of *wujub'aqli*, or an action that is rationally required for the good of humanity based on norms that serve both Islamic and natural law. This concept, and the divine revelations that emphasize the values highlighted above are the foundation of human rights. Therefore, according to progressive Muslims, returning to a true understanding of these divine revelations is vital to ensuring that Islamic communities adhere to the human rights as laid out by these divine revelations.

By framing adherence to human rights principles as adherence to divine revelations, honoring and promoting human rights becomes an obligation for Muslims, one that is as important as fasting, practicing forgiveness, praying, and critical thinking. Progressive Muslims also acknowledge how Islam has significantly contributed to the understanding of human rights today.

LEGAL AND JUDICIAL SYSTEMS

The development of Islam's legal system with a qadi (judge) and their emphasis on qada (justice) emphasized fair and impartial judgements as a right for all individuals. This in turn influenced the modern legal system with the presence of a qualified individual overseeing the court and an emphasis on fair judgements

PROTECTION OF MINORITY RIGHTS

The Constitution of Medina was the first document in Islam to protect minority rights and ensure they were free to safely practice their religion and beliefs. Islamic empires in the Golden Age followed this precedent, protecting religious minorities across their empires, ensuring that minorities could practice their own faith and follow their own legal system.

EDUCATION ADVANCEMENT

The Islamic Golden Age contributed significantly to scientific advancements, modern technology used today, as well as the philosophical values espoused in Europe's Enlightenment period. Islamic scholars also increased accessibility to these philosophical works, translating classical works by Greek, Roman, and Indian Scholars.

HUMANITARIAN VALUES

The establishment of waqf (charitable endowment) and an emphasis on wealth distribution through zakat sought to ensure the welfare of a society and ensure that each individual had their needs met. This redistribution of wealth prioritized above all, the rights of marginalized individuals and groups across a community.

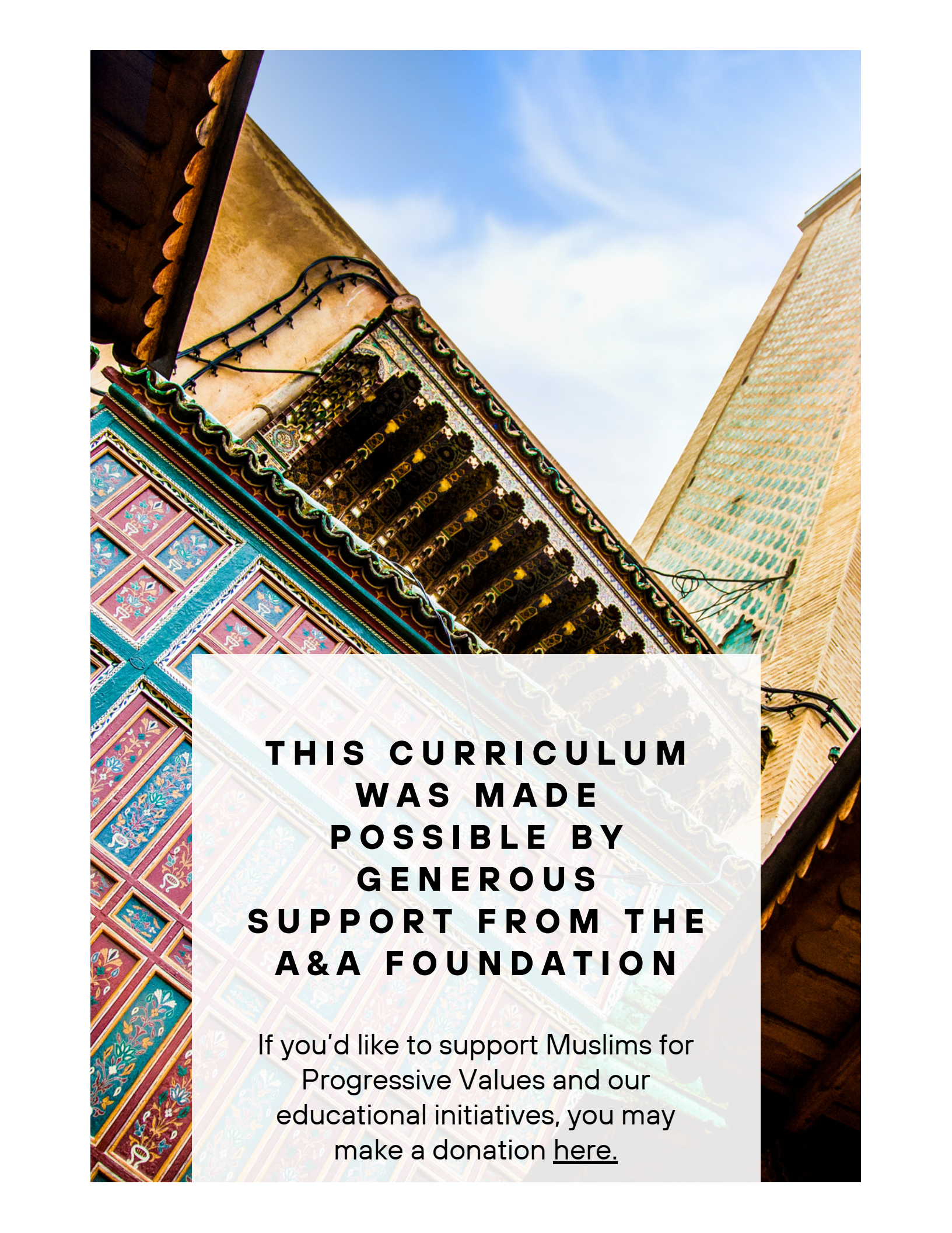
Unfortunately, many of these historical Islamic values that upheld human rights as a core part of the practice of Islam have been replaced by an overzealous majority whose expression of religion relies on posturing and ritual in a way that limits, rather than enhances, the rights of the Muslim community. This restriction on rights in Muslim communities again underscores the importance of ijihad, which allows Muslims to read Islamic texts in a way that prioritizes 21st century human rights in a way that is traditional but also anti-colonial and anti-fundamentalist. Ijtihad allows Muslims to reconcile human rights with their religious beliefs, rather than manipulate either Islam or 21st century human rights so that they are suitable with one another. This is particularly important for progressive Muslims who seek to avoid the manipulation of Islam to fit the trope of Western human rights superiority, which is often imposed on countries in the Global South. Rather than ascribe to this Western superiority myth, progressive Muslims condemn the clash of civilizations narrative that is

common in Western scholarship because it's an oversimplification of the diversity of Muslim communities and also because it denies the foundations and traditions of human rights protections in Islamic jurisprudence. That is not to say that the manifestation of human rights in the Islamic world is perfect, rather it is far from perfect as it has brought the Muslim community further away from the human rights traditions of the early Muslim communities. Instead, what we see today is a style of human rights language that closely resembles Western countries, bound up in rhetoric of language of the universality of human rights but with the actual application of these rights limited to the privileged who are afforded these rights. This is particularly evident in the human rights documents that exist in the Muslim world and those across the international world.

| Human Rights Documents in the Muslim World | Human Rights Documents in the International World |
|---|--|
| Arab Charter on Human Rights | Universal Declaration of Human Rights |
| Organization of Islamic Conference Cairo Declaration of Human Rights | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights |
| Organization of Islamic Conference Covenant on the Rights of the Child in Islam | <i>International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights</i> |

Often these documents enshrine human rights in principle only, with many signatories of these documents, both in the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, picking and choosing who is afforded these rights. Progressive Muslims, deploying multiple critique, call out the double standards of the human rights values enshrined in these documents. In the Western World, we see these double standards through violent foreign policy, like the Iraq War, the denial of Palestinians to live on their indigenous land, support for Muslim dictators, and the continued funding of Guantanamo Bay, where documented human rights abuses have become the norm. In the Muslim world, progressive Muslims criticize the double standard of Muslim governments' treatment of religious minorities, denial of basic human rights to migrant workers, and the suppression of the rights that Islam affords to women and girls.

Ultimately, like others from different faith and non-faith backgrounds, progressive Muslims strive for a world that can develop human rights mechanisms that actually promote and protect the human rights of all. The difference is that progressive Muslims believe, contrary to many in the West and fundamentalist Muslims, that a faith based framework serves as a core tool to advocate for human rights and socio-political change.



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