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What You Need to Know about Islam - Part 4 *Islam's Moral Beliefs*

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It is amazing how widespread Islam is around the world, but also how little most people know about it. It does have its own reputation, but that only tells part of the story. Reputations are generalizations that tend to be rather shallow. They may reveal some of the “what” about a faith, but not much about the “why.”

This article is part four of a five part series to provide a more in-depth understanding. Here is what will be covered in each of the installments. Today's article shares Islam's moral beliefs.

- Part One - The History of Islam - <https://www.marketfaith.org/2025/11/what-you-need-to-know-about-islam-part-1-history-of-islam/>
- Part Two - Islam's Authority Sources - <https://www.marketfaith.org/2025/11/what-you-need-to-know-about-islam-part-2-islams-authority-sources/>
- Part Three - Islam's Worldview Beliefs - <https://www.marketfaith.org/2025/12/what-you-need-to-know-about-islam-part-3-islams-worldview-beliefs/>
- **Part Four - Islam's Moral Beliefs**
- Part Five - Islam's Beliefs about Christianity

What You Need to Know About Islam *Islam's Moral Beliefs*

Introduction

On the surface, Islam's moral beliefs actually seem rather positive. On top of that, they are rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the teachings and example of the Prophet Muhammad) and believed strongly by most Muslims. The reason they are believed and followed so carefully is that they are considered not just personal virtues, but actual divine commands from Allah himself that shape how people must relate to God, themselves, and others. Thus, the matter we must understand is not so much about how morality is characterized in Islam, but in how it is applied. The application can be very different in different segments of the Muslim population. But before we get to the application, let's look at the basic moral beliefs themselves.

1. Belief in One God as the Foundation of Morality - The central moral principle is that Allah is one, perfect, and the ultimate source of right and wrong. All ethics flow from submission to God's will.

2. Justice - Justice is a major Qur'anic theme, and Muslims are commanded to be just, even if it is difficult or against self-interest. Injustice is considered one of the greatest sins.

3. Compassion and Mercy - God is repeatedly described as “The Most Merciful.” Muslims are encouraged to show kindness, forgiveness, and mercy to others. Charity and empathy are considered essential virtues.

4. Honesty and Truthfulness - Lying is strongly condemned. Keeping trusts and fulfilling promises are signs of true faith.

5. Purity and Modesty - This includes modesty in behavior, speech, and dress, and applies to both men and women. Moral purity (avoiding sexual immorality) is highly emphasized.

6. Respect for Parents and Family Loyalty - The Qur'an repeatedly commands kindness to parents right next to worship of God. Family cohesion, marriage, and children's rights are core moral values.

7. Humility - Arrogance is condemned as one of Satan's defining traits. Believers are urged to walk humbly and avoid pride.

8. Responsibility and Accountability - Every person is personally accountable before God. Good deeds and sins are recorded and will be weighed on the Day of Judgment. This establishes a moral seriousness in everyday conduct.

9. Charity and Social Responsibility - Caring for the poor, orphans, widows, and the vulnerable is a major obligation. Obligatory and voluntary charity are encouraged to promote economic justice.

10. Forgiveness and Reconciliation - Islam encourages believers to forgive those who wrong them. While justice is allowed, forgiveness is often described as the higher virtue.

11. Patience - Enduring trials, resisting temptation, and remaining steadfast in faith are all essential. Patience is considered a sign of strong character.

12. Moderation - Islam rejects extremes in worship, politics, and lifestyle. The “middle path” is praised as the ideal ethical stance.

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13. Protection of Life and Human Dignity - Human life is considered sacred. Murder, oppression, and exploitation are major crimes. All humans are believed to have inherent dignity regardless of ethnicity or social status.

But What Does This Really Mean?

As you can see, on a surface level, the moral beliefs that Islam asserts seem to be very positive. However, there is a way these things are defined within the faith that create a situation where their implications may be very different from those derived from Christian beliefs. These different definitions create a situation where what is thought in the West and by Christianity is not the same as what is thought in Islam. Beyond that, interpretation of Islamic texts regarding morality can become quite confusing, as different Muslim denominations have different approaches to interpreting the Qur'an and the hadiths. Additionally, the principle of abrogation (the concept in Islamic jurisprudence and Qur'anic interpretation that considers some revelations to be superseded or replaced by later revelations – which is also dealt with differently by the different denominations) throws another monkeywrench into the search for clarity. All these together make it difficult to know what moral path to follow. Let's take a deeper dive to see how that plays out in Islam for each of these moral teachings.

1. Belief in One God as the Foundation of Morality - The central moral principle is that Allah is one, perfect, and the ultimate source of right and wrong. All ethics flow from submission to God's will.

Implications:

- Allah is considered to be so transcendent that he does not interact personally with humanity in any way. Rather than do so personally, he communicates through angel agents. The result of this understanding of Allah is a belief system where love is de-emphasized. There is no sense of intimacy with him. Human beings are considered servants, or slaves, of Allah. Thus, the proper posture before Allah is submission, worship, obedience, and fear.
- Since Allah is considered to be completely transcendent, it is impossible to know for sure whether or not one has been chosen by him for heaven. So devout Muslims work diligently to please him in order to have a chance to go to heaven, then hope they are chosen.
- Both evil and good come from Allah, and whatever he chooses is considered right – and this can change in various situations. He is the author of every action, word, and thought, which includes also being the author of evil. He has predetermined everything that will ever occur in time.

- Allah does not love those who transgress against him, so human beings need show no love toward those people, as well. Thus, it is okay to hate infidels (non-Muslims) and even disown children who convert out of Islam.

2. Justice - Justice is a major Qur'anic theme, and Muslims are commanded to be just, even if it is difficult or against self-interest.

Implications:

- Injustice is considered one of the greatest sins. However, justice in Islamic law includes retributive justice based on the principle of an "eye for an eye." Corporal punishment (such as amputation for theft, and stoning for adultery), and capital punishment for certain religious transgressions (apostasy, for instance) are all considered just because Allah has sanctioned them (though these are applied differently by different Islamic groups.)

3. Compassion and Mercy - God is repeatedly described as "The Most Merciful." Muslims are encouraged to show kindness, forgiveness, and mercy to others. Charity and empathy are considered essential virtues.

Implications:

- Compassion and mercy are conditional, and can mean it is okay to treat non-Muslims as inferior, as it is better than executing them.
- Allah does not love those who transgress against him, so Muslims also need show no love toward those people. It is okay, according to some groups, to hate infidels (non-Muslims) and even disown children who convert out of Islam.

4. Honesty and Truthfulness - Lying is generally considered a major sin and a sign of hypocrisy. However, there are limited, specific circumstances where it is permissible to lie to prevent a greater harm or achieve a significant good.

Implications:

- This can mean that any action that achieves a "praiseworthy aim" for the faith is permissible – including lying.

5. Purity and Modesty - Modesty is a fundamental Islamic principle that applies to behavior, speech, and attire. This applies to both men and women. Moral purity (avoiding sexual immorality) is highly emphasized.

Moral Implications:

- Modest dress is mandatory (though this is interpreted differently among different groups). Some groups enforce strict dress codes, while others are more liberal, while still encouraging a certain level of modesty. The range,

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particularly for women, goes from head scarfs, to face coverings, to full body garments.

- Some groups, though not all, enforce strict segregation between the sexes in daily life.
- Concerning sexual morality for non-married people, fornication is not permitted and may involve flogging (however, it requires four male eyewitnesses to the act for a conviction).
- Concerning marriage:
 - * Men have legal leadership/responsibility over women in marriage.
 - * Polygyny is allowed (a man may have up to four wives under certain conditions).
 - * Temporary marriage is permitted in Twelver Shia Islam.
 - * Adultery is forbidden, and corporal punishments are permitted for offenders.
 - * Divorce rights traditionally lean more toward men.

6. Respect for Parents and Family Loyalty - The Qur'an repeatedly commands kindness to parents right next to worship of God. Family cohesion, marriage, and children's rights are core moral values.

Implications:

- There are exceptions to this rule as it is permissible to disown, or in some places even kill, family members who convert out of Islam or otherwise dishonor the family.

7. Humility - Arrogance is condemned as one of Satan's defining traits. Believers are urged to walk humbly and avoid pride.

Implications:

- While forgiveness is encouraged, retaliation for various offenses is morally acceptable and legally enforceable.

8. Responsibility and Accountability - Every person is personally accountable before God. Good deeds and sins are recorded and will be weighed on the Day of Judgment. This establishes a moral seriousness in everyday conduct.

Implications:

- Allah does not love those who transgress against him, so people must legally follow Islamic law so as not to anger him.

9. Charity and Social Responsibility - Caring for the poor, orphans, widows, and the vulnerable is a major obligation. Obligatory and voluntary charity are encouraged to promote economic justice.

Implications:

- The application of this principle is uneven with various distinctions made depending on denominational affiliation.

10. Forgiveness and Reconciliation - Islam encourages believers to forgive those who wrong them. While justice is allowed, forgiveness is often described as the higher virtue.

Implications:

- The application of this principle is uneven with various distinctions made depending on denominational affiliation.

11. Patience - Enduring trials, resisting temptation, and remaining steadfast in faith are all essential. Patience is considered a sign of strong character.

Implications:

- This principle would roughly parallel what is taught in the Christian faith concerning how people should personally grow in their faith.

12. Moderation - Islam rejects extremes in worship, politics, and lifestyle. The "middle path" is praised as the ideal ethical stance.

Implications:

- Various acts in life are legalistically prescribed, not matters of the heart. Matters concerning politics, in particular, vary widely in practice from denomination to denomination and country to country. Most countries that are dominated by Islam, and even some Muslim communities within other countries, tend to be less than moderate in practice.

13. Protection of Life and Human Dignity - Human life is considered sacred. Murder, oppression, and exploitation are major crimes. All humans are believed to have inherent dignity regardless of ethnicity or social status.

Moral Implications:

- While most mainstream Muslim theologians consider this true, there is a wide variety of belief and practice throughout the Muslim world. Many consider Muslim lives more sacred than others.

Islamic Morality Compared to the Morality Expressed in the U.S. Constitution

In order to provide a little more context concerning moral implications, it is helpful to make another comparison. Some moral beliefs have a direct effect on civic life. With particular reference to its effects in American society, there are some Islamic beliefs or interpretations that can conflict with the U.S. Constitution – which is based on Christian moral concepts. This is particularly the case if they are implemented as law rather than personal religious practice. As of now, it is unlawful for Islamic (sharia) law to supercede civic law

in America. That said, it is also important to be vigilant as there are Islamic communities that are making efforts to implement sharia in particular jurisdictions. Here are the major areas where there could be conflicts.

1. Apostasy - Leaving Islam (apostasy) is considered a sin, and in some jurisdictions is punishable by law.
 - The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, including the right to convert or leave a religion. Any attempt to punish someone legally for leaving Islam would violate U.S. law.
2. Blasphemy - Speaking critically of Allah, the Prophet, or Islam can be considered a serious offense, subject to legal rulings (*fatwa*) and punishable in some jurisdictions.
 - Freedom of speech is protected in America, including speech offensive to religion. Enforcing blasphemy laws would violate constitutional rights.
3. Gender Roles and Marriage Laws - Men and women have prescribed roles in Islam, and inheritance and testimony laws are generally unequal (e.g., daughters inherit half of what sons do). Additionally, polygamy is permitted in Islam (up to four wives under some interpretations). Beyond that, child marriage may also be permitted based on some interpretations.
 - Equal protection under the law based on the 14th Amendment to the Constitution prohibits legal discrimination based on sex. Also, marriage laws in the U.S. forbid polygamy and enforce a minimum age for marriage.
4. Criminal Law - Certain crimes, such as adultery, theft, drinking alcohol, and apostasy have fixed corporal punishments under Islamic law (e.g., amputation, stoning).
 - Based on the U.S. Constitution, cruel and unusual punishment is forbidden by the 8th Amendment, and some Islamic corporal punishments are considered cruel and unusual, thus making them violations of U.S. criminal law and human rights standards.
5. Religious Arbitration and Sharia Courts - Some Muslims participate in sharia-based arbitration for marriage, divorce, and inheritance, and there are elements that believe sharia courts should replace civil courts.
 - In America, the nation's laws don't permit that. Courts can only enforce arbitration if both parties consent voluntarily, and if the outcomes comply with civil law.
6. Freedom of Expression and Political Authority - According to some interpreters of Islamic law, criticism of Islamic law or any governing authority enforcing sharia is forbidden. There are even those who support governance based strictly on sharia.
 - Freedom of speech and press are guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution, and this protects critics of religion and government. Attempts to enforce political sharia would violate this standard.

Islamic Morality Compared to Christian Moral Beliefs

For even further context concerning moral implications, it is helpful to make another comparison. There are several Islamic beliefs and practices that actually conflict with core Christian moral teachings, particularly in areas related to sexuality, violence, and the treatment of others.

1. Sexual Ethics

Christian Moral Belief:

- Sexual activity is morally permissible only within heterosexual marriage.
- Adultery, fornication, and polygamy are sinful.

Islamic Belief:

- Polygamy is allowed (a man may have up to four wives under certain conditions).
- Adultery is forbidden. Corporal punishments, such as stoning and flogging, exist in some interpretations for adultery.
- Temporary marriage is permitted in Twelver Shia Islam.
- Divorce rights traditionally lean more toward men.
- Men have legal leadership/responsibility over women in marriage.
- Fornication may be punishable by flogging. However, it requires four male eyewitnesses to the act.

2. Punishment and Justice

Christian Moral Belief:

- Violence is morally restricted (e.g., self-defense, just war).
- Forgiveness and mercy are emphasized (turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies).

Islamic Belief:

- Corporal punishments are prescribed in some interpretations (e.g.: amputation for theft, stoning for adultery).
- Retaliation is allowed ("an eye for an eye").
- Apostasy can be punishable by death in some interpretations.

3. Treatment of Other Religions

Christian Moral Belief:

- Christians are called to love neighbors and treat strangers with compassion.
- Conversion must be by persuasion, not force.

Islamic Belief:

- The Dhimmi system (an Islamic legal framework for protecting non-Muslim religious minorities like Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians within an Islamic state) has historically allowed non-Muslims to live under Islamic rule with restrictions and extra taxes (jizya).
- In some interpretations, blasphemy or apostasy by non-Muslims can be legally punishable.
- Classical doctrine: Jihad can include defensive warfare and (traditionally) offensive expansion under certain conditions. Non-Muslims living under Muslim rule have historically paid a tax (jizyah) in exchange for protection and exemption from military service.

4. Role of Women

Christian Moral Belief:

- Equality in worth before God; men and women are morally responsible equally.
- Leadership in the church may vary by denomination, but moral equality is affirmed.

Islamic Belief:

- In court, a woman's testimony may count half that of a man.
- Women may have restricted inheritance rights (half that of men in some cases).
- Certain Islamic schools restrict women's public or religious leadership.

5. Forgiveness vs. Retaliation

Christian Moral Belief:

- Forgive those who wrong you.

Islamic Belief (in some interpretations):

- Retaliation is permitted ("life for life, eye for eye").
- Forgiveness is encouraged, but retaliation is morally acceptable and legally enforceable.

6. Observance of Religious Law vs. Grace

Christian Moral Belief:

- Moral obedience to biblical teachings flow from faith in God's grace, not fear of legal punishment.
- There are no legal sanctions for strictly religious failures.

Islamic Belief:

- Obedience to Sharia law is necessary for righteousness and salvation.
- Moral failures may carry corporal or legal punishments, as well as possible exclusion from heaven.
- In many Muslim-majority societies, insulting the Prophet or desecrating the Qur'an is criminalized.

7. Freedom of Religion

Christian Moral Belief:

- While a person's choices will have eternal effects, individuals are free to choose their own religious beliefs.

Islamic Belief:

- Classical Islamic jurisprudence teaches that apostasy is a punishable offense, sometimes even a capital offense.

8. Slavery

Christian Moral Belief:

- While in history some people have tried to use the Bible to justify slavery, it is not actually justified. The overall teaching in the Bible about freedom, human dignity (Image of God), and the condemnation of kidnapping and abuse points to it as being sinful.

Islamic Belief:

- Like other ancient civilizations, Islamic law historically allowed slavery. Although essentially abolished today across the Muslim world, the classical allowance is debated historically and still practiced in some jurisdictions.

9. Sexual Segregation and Modesty Norms

Christian Moral Belief:

- There is no biblical teaching advocating for segregation of the sexes.
- There is no legal requirement concerning a person's dress, though the Bible does teach principles that would encourage modesty.

Islamic Belief:

- Modesty is a fundamental Islamic principle that applies to behavior, speech, and attire. The application of this varies widely according to local interpretations.
- Some groups enforce strict sexual segregation, while others do not.
- Modest dress is mandatory, but that is interpreted differently in different jurisdictions. Some groups enforce strict dress codes, while others are more liberal – while still encouraging a certain level of modesty. The range, particularly for women, goes from head scarfs, to face coverings, to full body garments.

Conclusion

A situation exists in Islam where there is a great deal of agreement concerning basic beliefs, yet there is a massive amount of diversity regarding implementation of those beliefs. There is no longer a single, uncontested moral center in Islam. While there is still a shared symbolic core, moral authority is fragmented. Virtually all Muslims affirm the authority of the Qur'an, the priority of Muhammad, and the Five Pillars. At the same time, there are several different moral models.

The range of moral models runs from rather liberal to extreme radical conservatism. Estimates indicate that extremists comprise anywhere from 2 - 25% of the Muslim population worldwide, depending on how extremism is defined (which translates to between 100 million to 500 million people). This is enough to profoundly and negatively influence any society that comes to be dominated by Islamic belief. For that reason, it is critical that Christians understand Islam, along with an understanding of not only why Christian morality is superior, but why the Christian faith is true.

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