



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

Islam and Animals

Overview

“It is frequently claimed that one position or another represents ‘true’ Islam. Nevertheless, there exists no unified Islamic or Muslim view of nonhuman animals.”ⁱ

With roots beginning in 7th century AD Islam (literally “submission”) is one of the world’s largest monotheistic traditions. Originating with Muhammad ibn ‘Abdullāh, Islam is centered within the *Qur’anic* text believed by Muslims to be the verbatim word of God spoken through the Prophet. Practitioners of Islam, called Muslims, not only look to the *Qur’an* but to the teachings and examples of Muhammad in the *Sunnah* and *Hadith*. Muhammad is believed to be the last prophet of Islam living between 570 and 632 bc.

The majority of Muslims fall into one of two denominations. **Sunni** (80%-90%) and **Shia** (10-20%). Islam is the second largest religion and has followers throughout the world. Indonesia holds largest Muslim population at 13% with the rest being divided throughout South Asia, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Islam continues to be one of the fastest growing religions and today there are roughly 1.5 billion Muslims throughout the world.

While Islam is both a vast and complex religion, there are five basic tenants that are viewed as obligatory to all believers. These are often called the **Pillars of Islam** and their practice is seen as a commitment to the faith. They are:

1. *Shahada* (creed)
2. *Salah* (ritual prayer)
3. *Sawm* (fasting during the month of Ramadan)
4. *Zakat* (alms giving)
5. *Hajj* (pilgrimage)

While there is no “governing body” that can speak to all believers, each denomination has various scholars that speak to the text in order to guide Muslims through the modern world. Although both the *Sunnis* and *Shi’ites* have *Imams* (or “leaders”), they are viewed as having a much greater role within the *Shi’ite* tradition.

Where *Sunnis* look to the Imam as one who leads communal services, *Shi’ites* believe that *Imams* are the rightful successors of Muhammad and possess divine knowledge and authority. In *Sunni* Islam *Imams* are perceived as religious scholars often studying the schools of

jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the science of *Hadith*, or the schools of theology (*Aqidah*). Because of this they are able to comment on religious text but do not possess divine authority in the way *Shi'ite* Imams do.

Early experience with animals

One of the most important factors when discussing attitudes towards nonhuman animals is the consideration of historical and cultural influences. Unlike some religions, practitioners of Islam are spread throughout the world living in an array of geographical regions and abiding to a varying set of cultural norms. Thus, it is important not only to examine these cultural differences, but to remember that there is no consistent Islamic view on nonhuman animals that can be seen throughout the Muslim world.

A religion born out of the desert, the roots of Islam began in a society that relied heavily on animals for daily living. As a largely nomadic culture most early Muslims used animals for transportation and as a source of food. Often living in severe desert climate, a vegetarian diet would have been difficult to both obtain and sustain throughout the year.

History has shown that animals were important throughout pre-Islamic Arabia. While there is some debate as to whether these individuals practiced *totemism* or animalism, it is clear that many early tribes prohibited the eating of certain animals and often attributed human characteristics to qualities seen among animals.

In The *Qu'ran*

Since Islam is such a text-bound religion it is important to understand the place that animals hold within the *Qu'ran*. Numerous types of animals are mentioned throughout the text and out of 114 *sūras*, or *Qu'ranic* chapters, there are six named after animals. These include the Cow (*sūra* 2), the Cattle (*sūra* 6), the Bee (*sūra* 16), the Ant (*sūra* 28), the Spider (*sūra* 29) and the Elephant (*sūra* 105). Although both humans and non-human animals are said to be creations of God, humans are often distinguished as “the speaking animal” (*hayawān al-nātiq*). While this may be true, the *Qu'ran* also acknowledges that nonhuman animals have the ability to speak. This can be seen in *sūra* 27:16:

“Solomon succeeded David. He said: ‘Know, you people, we have been taught the tongue of birds and endowed with all good things. Surely this is the signal favour.’”

The one major distinction that the *Qu'ran* makes between human and non-human animals is the possession of *taqwa* or “volition”. Since only humans possess this they are made responsible for their actions in a way that non-human animals are not. Other than this, the *Qu'ran* makes clear that animals possess many human and divine qualities such as the ability to receive Divine revelation, to praise God and to have souls (*nafs*). There are also several *hadiths* in which animals are seen praying and speaking to various Imams and it has been said by some Islamic scholars that animals will be resurrected on the Day of Judgement along with humans.

However, the *Qu'ran* also specifies a type of hierarchy of creation in which humans are referred to as *khalīfa*. While the literal translation of this word is “successor,” many modern Islamic

scholars interpret it as “vice-regent” citing the passage:

“I am setting on the earth a vice-regent (khalifa)” (Q 2:30)

Thus while non-human animals are subjected to the needs of humans, the role of humans is not to be an exploiter but a steward. Indeed the *Qu’ran* states that animals are created for human benefit (“and he has created cattle for you...” Q: 16:5) but also makes clear that all things belong to *Allah* who has created the earth for all living beings.

“This she-camel of God is a sign to you; so leave her to graze in God’s earth, and let her come to no harm, or you shall be seized with grievous punishment.” (Q 7:73)

Muhammad

Much of this compassion towards animals is seen throughout the *haidths* reminding Muslims of Muhammad's interest in non-human animals. The *hadiths* contain many stories surrounding the care and treatment of animals and the rewards for compassion. One story concerns a man drinking from a well who upon seeing a thirsty dog dips his shoe back into the well and holds it out for the dog to drink. Upon seeing this Muhammad's disciples asked if there is a reward for taking care of beasts. To which Muhammad replied: “There are rewards for benefiting every animal having a moist liver”ⁱⁱⁱ [i.e. to all living creatures].

Muhammad enjoined many of his followers to show kindness towards animals and only use them for necessary purposes. In one *hadith* he is seen reprimanding several of his followers for sitting idly on their camels in the market saying:

“Do not treat the backs of your animals as pulpits, for God Most high has made them subject to you only to convey you to a place which you could not otherwise have reached without much difficulty.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Muhammad forbade hunting for sport and the branding or hitting of animals in the face. However, he did allow the killing of certain animals such as poisonous snakes, mice and scorpions.

Meat Eating

“Forbidden to you are the dead animals, blood, the flesh of swine, and that which has been slaughtered as a sacrifice for other than Allah...”^{iv}

Historically, many pre-Islamic Arab cultures were meat eaters. This was often necessary for survival in harsh desert climates and was a tradition left over from earlier Pagan groups. Today the majority of the world's Muslims continue to eat meat however; they are often restricted by religious doctrine to the kinds of meat they eat and how it is prepared. Many people are familiar with the terms **Halal** and **Haram** and their importance when understanding Muslim dietary restrictions. *Haram*, meaning forbidden, is used throughout religious texts to describe something that is prohibited by the Muslim faith.

The opposite term, *halal*, describes something that is legal and is usually restricted to dietary laws and forbidden substances. Luckily the majority of the *Qur'an* designates what foods are *halal* or *haram* however there can be differences in belief within schools and geographical regions. The majority of foods are considered *halal* except for the following, which are considered *haram*:

- Meat from swine (including pork products and by-products)
- The majority of carnivorous animals
- Animals without extended ears such as snakes, reptiles, insects etc.
- Alcohol or other Intoxicants
- Blood and blood by-products
- Any food contaminated by any of the above

Slaughter

“Verily Allah has enjoined goodness (ihsan) on everything; when you kill, kill in a good way and when you slaughter, slaughter in a good way. So everyone of you should sharpen his knife, and let the slaughtered animal die comfortably.”

Islam prescribes that Muslims only eat animals that have gone through the process of ritual slaughter (*dhabb*). While the *Qur'an* does not necessarily require this method of ritual slaughter, such techniques were prescribed by Muhammad to comply with statements concerning food made within the *Qur'an*.

There are several parts to the process of ritual slaughter however not all are agreed upon by the entire Muslim community. Many Muslims agree that a mentally stable adult Muslim must conduct the slaughter and a prayer to *Allah* must be read before the killing. This is seen as a way to thank God and remember that you are killing one of the creations he put on earth. However, some Muslims consider it acceptable to eat animals slaughtered by the “People of the Book” which would include Jews and Christians who might not say such a prayer.

Great consideration is taken for the animal before it is to be slaughtered. Muhammad stipulated that the blade must be sharp so as to kill in one swipe and that no animal is to be slaughtered in front of another. He also noted that the blade should remain hidden until the last moment and that the animals throat be cut on the large arteries of the neck but not sever the spinal chord. Since the consumption of blood is considered *haram*, the animal must be left until all the blood has drained from its body. These methods are within the practice of Islam and ensure that the animal dies quickly and with the least amount of pain as possible. Practices such as stunning an animal to induce unconsciousness are frowned upon by many Muslims and the meat is often considered *haram*.

Vivisection

“One’s interest or need does not annul other’s right”^{vi}

When examining modern issues of animal protection it is important to remember that these concerns did not exist at the time that Islamic ideology was founded. This means that religious

law and belief surrounding modern issues, such as vivisection and factory farming, have not been laid out in traditional religious text. Consequently modern Islamic scholars must rely on sources of Islamic law (the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*) to make inferences regarding modern practices. *Ijtihad*, or inference by analogy, is similar to our concept of jurisprudence and allows Islamic clerics to rule on contemporary issues that Muslims face. This process is often called upon when discussing the concept of vivisection, which did not exist in its contemporary form fourteen centuries ago. Fortunately, Islamic scholars have examined religious teaching in regards to this subject and many have agreed on several points.

The killing or harming of an animal to satisfy what is unessential to humans is seen to be in violation with Islamic teachings. However, research may be justified in social and biological sciences if humans or other beings would benefit through such research. Citing Muhammad many scholars note that “actions shall be judged according to intention”^{vii} and that the ethicality of an act is based on the intention of the individual who performs it. Accordingly, research and experiments may be justified under Islamic law if:

- The animal is not subject to any pain (under anesthetics)
- The animal is not disfigured
- Research is done honestly for knowledge and not for the promotion of commercial interests
- Operations conducted by conscientious and qualified scientists
- If there is no other alternative

Resources

There are many resources available for more information regarding Islamic teachings on animals. They include:

Books:

Animals in Islam- Al-Hafiz B.A. Masri
Islamic Concern for Animals- Al-Hafiz B.A. Masri
Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures- Richard Foltz
A Communion of Subjects- Paul Waldau & Kimberley Patton

Web Resources:

Islam Awareness (<http://www.islamawareness.net/Animals/>)
Profauna: (http://www.profauna.org/content/en/islam_cares_for_animals.html)
Humane Center for Animal Welfare-Jordan: (http://www.hcaw-jordan.com/Welfare_of_Animals)

ⁱ Richard Foltz, “Dimension of Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Culture” in *A Communion of Subjects*, Waldau and Patton, 2006.

ⁱⁱ M. Hafiz Syed, *Thus Speak Muhammed*, Madras, 1962, p. 6.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Mishkat al-Masabih*, 829 (as seen in Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures*, 19)

^{iv}Suratul Maaidah 5:3

^v Sahih Muslim 21:4810

^{vi} Al-Hafiz B.A. Masri *Islamic Concern for Animals*

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For more information and resources visit humanesociety.org/faith