

Islam and Good Governance A Political Philosophy of Ihsan

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Muhammad Abdul Muqtedar Khan is a professor of Indian origin in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Delaware. He is known as a well-established author who has published several notable works, such as *American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom* and *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives*. In 2019, he wrote his latest book of an interdisciplinary nature: *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan*, where social sciences, humanities and theology intersect.

Political philosophy is considered one of the most important intellectual disciplines, since it sets the standards of judgment, defines constructive purposes for the use of public power, and constructs the frameworks to which we attach our ideas as well as the way we view the world. Hence, it is self-evident to enjoy remarkable and compelling books on governance and political philosophy from an Islamic perspective given that it is the fastest growing worldview on earth. Whereas such works are in general limited to either the moderate discourse of political Islam or the militant discourse of Jihadism as analyzed in the recently published work *Political Islam Inside-Out: Adaptation and Resistance of*

Islamist Movements and Parties in North Africa edited by Giulia Cimini and Beatriz Tomé-Alonso, this monograph by Khan is the first of its kind to pay thorough attention to the concept of *Ihsan* (beauty and goodness) in the political context. This is a dimension of political Islam which has been unintelligibly overlooked until now.

As such, the fact that Khan's *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan* is of groundbreaking nature is twofold: Firstly, it enriches the field of political philosophy, in particular Islamic political philosophy by introducing the concept of *Ihsan*, which is a novelty for this context. Secondly, it ventures *Ihsan* into politics! This is a major contribution to Islamic thought since *Ihsan* has been mostly understood within the scope of personal manners, interpersonal relations and worship up to the present time.

To provide context for the urgency of introducing a unique Islamic political philosophy, Khan starts in his first chapter with laying the philosophical and theological foundations for his work. His starting point is the appealing Quranic verse: '*God is with those who do beautiful deeds*' (Quran 29:69), followed by the question: Why has *Ihsan* been excluded from the political sphere until now? A legitimate question considering the amount of other Quranic verses and hadith revolving around the concept of *Ihsan*. In answering this question Khan also touches upon the fact that according to his perspective, *Ihsan* is the antithesis of identity. He explains that where identity mainly deals with external manifestations, *Ihsan* is about the internalization of excellence inspired by love for the divine.

The discipline of theology is dominant in the second chapter of the book. Khan makes clear how the development of *Shariah* and the rise of contemporary Islamic movements enhanced the loss of *Ihsan*. *Shariah* has in many circles and among many Islamic communities become almost equal to Islam. However, Islam is a *din*, and therefore has a much broader and wider scope than *Shariah*. Khan traces in this chapter, how over centuries *Ihsan* has been excluded as a consequence of this. This is brilliantly done by analyzing in depth two case studies: The recompense for breaking fast and blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. By exploring these two cases it becomes clear how scholars easily tend to

approach such cases only from harsh legal principles while excluding the compassion and *Ihsan* as embodied in the lived example of the Prophet Muhammad.

In Chapter 3, the reader is introduced to how Islam was reduced over time to an identity. Several reasons can explain this phenomenon, with Islamism and Islamic modernity as the most important two. Khan analyzes how the demand for Islam as a prefix – Islamic schools, Islamic economy, etc. – has occupied the minds of many thinkers and the pens of plenty of writers. Muslim consciousness is consumed with defending Islamic identity, according to Khan. This is what Islamic revivalism has been all about for the past centuries. And if this continues, no profound transformation will happen at the level of the individual or society. However, from an Islamic perspective, and as the Quran teaches us, “It is not identity that needs to be revived, but it is the self that needs to be purified” (p. 76).

Chapter 4 touches upon the core of the book. In it the concept of *Ihsan* is explained in detail. It is interesting how this concept is approached from both a classical as well as a contemporary perspective. For the classical understanding, Khan relies on giants such as Ibn Taymiyyah and al-Ghazzali in their definition of *Ihsan*. For the contemporary understanding, Khan undertakes an intensive journey through the Middle East. He pauses in Morocco, Egypt, Iraq and other countries to engage with intellectuals, traditional scholars and academics to seek their understandings on *Ihsan*. It is noteworthy that Khan mentions that those discussions and engagement actually showed him that *Ihsan* is slowly disappearing from “the Muslim collective memory” (p. 102).

An attempt to restore this disappearance is made by Khan in the following fifth chapter. Is it possible to come up with a new vision on *Ihsan* as a first step to revive this concept in the awareness of Muslims? The word *Muhsin* is introduced: Someone who practices *Ihsan*. Also, well-deserved attention is given in this chapter to the hadith of Gabriel. In fact, this whole chapter is built upon it. What makes this hadith so important is how it “elevates *Ihsan* as the jewel in the crown” (p. 108). In addition, Khan is convinced that this hadith is the only evidence causing the orthodox concede that there is an inner spiritual world.

He goes further in this chapter by humbly suggesting that the purpose of creation according to the Quran is *Ihsan*. A vision which he bases on the second verse of surah 67 in the Quran. He ends this chapter by thoroughly discussing eight elements of *Ihsan*.

If for all these centuries, until up today, *Ihsan* was not included in the political sphere, then what was that political sphere like in Islamic history? This question is discussed and answered in depth in chapter 6 of the book. A critical genealogy of Islamic political philosophy is provided and in order to do so, this chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, Islamic theories of polity and governance are articulated starting with the work of al-Farabi, followed by the works of al-Mawardi, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Khaldun and closing with the works of Shaikh Saa'di of Shiraz. The second part discusses the theories of Islamic polity and Islamic governance, whereby responses to postcolonial realities are discussed as well as the caliphates, constitution and the quest for the Islamic State.

After a detailed explanation of the concept of *Ihsan*, and providing an in depth and critical genealogy of Islamic political philosophy, Khan now proposes his model of *Ihsan* and good governance in Chapter 7. In doing so, he provides a truly innovative model for Islamic governance where we move from structure to process and where Muslim societies become societies of *Muhsins*. Furthermore, by applying this model citizens become a pro-active part of governing by carrying the responsibility of acting as witnesses, character builders and lawmakers.

As the journey comes to an end in the last and eighth chapter, thoughts are shared as well as reflections on the content of the book and an emphasis on the importance of it for Muslims and Muslim societies worldwide. Khan's book charters a new area in the fields of theology as well as political philosophy. Therefore, this book is not only enlightening for Muslim scholars specializing in theology and/or political philosophy, it is as much an enrichment for non-Muslim scholars by providing them a deeper understanding of what Islam has to offer when it comes to political philosophy. Nevertheless, the book also has its drawbacks. Although it provides a model for an Islamic political philosophy based on *Ihsan*, it is still a theoretical approach without any previous practical

examples supporting the practicality of the model. Also, at certain points this work of Khan reduces the flaws in Islamic political philosophy to the dominance of *Shariah* and the absence of *Ihsan* in the field of politics. This approach is too simplistic, since it disregards other major elements of governance like power struggles, inequalities and authority. In other words, it is not enough to assure good governance by weakening the role of *Shariah* and introducing *Ihsan* into the political sphere. This leaves us with the conclusion that although this book is a noteworthy contribution to political philosophy, further research needs to be performed in order to come up with applicable and effective models for good governance based on the Islamic worldview.

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