



Islam and good governance: a political philosophy of Ihsan

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BOOK REVIEWS

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In recent decades, the political science literature has not been very sympathetic to Islam. For a long time, the academic debate has centered on whether Islam is compatible with democracy, whether it is linked to terrorism, and if Muslim nations have competent governance. The failure of the Arab Spring's democratization process, terrorist attacks by radical organizations and other factors have fueled the argument that Islam as a political force is incapable of providing fair, representative, and well-functioning governance to Muslim people all over the world. Muqtedar Khan opposes this argument in *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan* by proposing Islamic thought and political philosophy based on the idea of *Ihsan*.

Inspired by Quran 29:69 that God is with those who do beautiful things, Khan attempts to bring *Ihsan* – doing beautiful deeds – into politics. He defines *Ihsan* as a spiritual state in which love triumphs over the law, ethics triumphs over politics, compassion triumphs over vengeance, other-caring or self-annihilation (*Fanaa*) triumphs over-identification or self-assertion, and process (Islamic governance) triumphs over structure (Islamic state). This, he maintains, is the highest, most beautiful, and most caring condition, as well as “an enlightened understanding of Islam” (p. 97).

Khan discusses how Muslims lost sight of *Ihsan* by interpreting Islamic norms with an emphasis on punishments rather than kindness and forgiveness. The example of breaking a Ramadan fast is particularly interesting: Muslims are required to fast for two months in a row if they intentionally break a Ramadan fast (Chapter 2). Khan demonstrates that the prophetic tradition includes a strand that includes mercy and tolerance, which judicial interpretation avoids. Another example is Asia Bibi's case, in which she, a Pakistani Christian woman, is accused of insulting the Prophet, which has sparked widespread outrage (Chapter 2).

Khan also discusses Muslim reactions to modernity in connection to Islamic revivalism. In Khan's view, there are three responses shown by Muslims: traditionalists, modernists, Islamists, and secularists. Khan champions modernists because they have “sought to demonstrate that Islam is not incompatible with science, modernity, democracy, and human rights” (p. 49) and are “primarily concerned with the loss of the principal belief that Islam is a progressive religion” (p. 49). On other hand, he specifically attacks traditionalists and Islamists who perceive Islam as a worldly ideology equivalent to communism and capitalism, and who are unable to “separate what is Western culture from what is fundamental modernity” (p. 70). Khan examines past and modern interpretations of *Ihsan*, arguing that they largely fail to achieve *Ihsan*'s genuine potential. Khan uses the works of Ibn Arabi, Jalaluddin Rumi, Al-Ghazali, Sheikh Abdesselam Yassine and Sheikh Muhammad bin Hassan to clarify the ancient and current interpretations of *Ihsan*. Despite the fact that *Ihsan* is the key to a better understanding of Islam and has been studied by a number of academics in the past and present, Khan claims that there is a widespread lack of interest in using it to improve political behavior today.

As a reply, Khan presents his own understanding of *Ihsan*, beginning with the Hadith of Gabriel on which he bases his theory, by identifying some specific aspects of it, such as love, witnessing God, political forgiveness and mercy, the pursuit of excellence, beauty, complete submission, and epistemology. He is attempting to develop a worldview on *Ihsan* through these aspects. A critical genealogy of Islamic political thought is presented by Khan, saying

that the Islamic political tradition as a whole has favored power and law over process, and has attempted to enforce religiosity through the state. Khan claims that throughout Islamic history's greatest periods, politics was truly progressive, with realistic and inclusive solutions found to alleviate political challenges. Consent and accommodation between different tribes were sought during the Prophet's time, and elections were not considered as a break from rules. While these policies were consistent with the concept of *Ihsan*, judicial and instrumental approaches dominated Islamic discourse over time, thanks to the influence of Al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah, and replaced the goal of good governance with other objectives such as implementing Shariah or restoring Islamic civilization's global dominance.

Finally, Khan discusses what he sees as a possible transition from today's real-politik to a "politics of *Ihsan*," as a culmination of the prior chapters. Khan presents five *Ihsan*-based principles for an Islamic government, claiming that Islamic governance "is the attainment of virtuous results such as social justice, tolerance, acceptance, compassion, and peace" (p. 209). In essence, these suggestions indicate that Muslims should govern themselves according to the prophetic paradigm of constitutionalism, consent, and inclusivity, focusing on good governance rather than Islamic governance. Khan also argues that rather than relying on the limiting impact of legal interpretation to understand justice, Muslims should seek security and independence in order to improve their behavior.

Islam and Good Governance might serve as a helpful reference book for anyone interested in learning about the literature on *Ihsan* and Islamic political thinking in relation to it. Khan demonstrates that secularism is not the sole option for creating effective governance in the Islamic world by focusing on a concept that has been overlooked in both the literature and political discourse. Rather, he believes that Islam has a normative dimension, *Ihsan*, which encourages people to strive for perfection and beauty in all aspects of their lives, including politics. The problem with today's Islamic governments and movements, according to Khan, is that they are overly focused on the judicial, Shariah-based interpretation of Islam, which prioritizes strict laws and punishment over constitutionalism, consent, and inclusion, all of which are essential elements in the prophetic tradition of governance. Khan's contribution is significant in scholarly terms because the modern literature on politics and religion lacks this type of normative discussion.

Need to be noted that Khan offers a normative account, but he fails to demonstrate how *Ihsan* might be implemented in current politics in a realistic, rather than normative, manner. We may need Islamic ideals in today's destabilizing Islamic world, but the laws that drive Islamic politics are nothing like what Khan envisioned in *Islam and Good Governance*. As a result, a politician will most likely see the book as a fantasy rather than practical advice. Nonetheless, the book's intellectual contribution is unaffected by the divide between idealism and realism.


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