

BOOK REVIEW

M. A. Muqtedar Khan - Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan

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The work currently under review, by M. A. Muqtedar Khan, professor at the University of Delaware (USA) and expert in Islamic thought, governance and international relations, is a unique addition to the subject area, exploring new dimensions of Islamic political philosophy. A serious, critical evaluation of the subject—theory *vis-a-vis* practice—Khan challenges the many political understandings held by classical and modern Islamic political thinkers. Human minds (irrespective of their religious bents) have searched through the ages for a world order capable of providing peace and tranquillity to all people. Consequently, a number of political theories have emerged deliberating on the process and structure of governance and government. Disappointed with conventional forms of government (*viz.* democracy, secularism, socialism, republicanism and presidential) Muslim scholars have attempted to present a valid and universal alternative capable of transforming contemporary scenes of chaos and confusion into something resembling order. In the recent past, however, Muslim scholars and other Islamic reform movements have failed to convince humanity (especially people of different faiths) that the Islamic approach to good governance is the solution modern minds are searching for. As in his prior publication on Islamic political thought, Khan here presents his subject in a different and unique way, anchoring the political philosophy of Islam to its most recommended principle of *ihsan* (excellence).

The book is a brief yet critical and comprehensive treatment of Islamic political thought spread over eight chapters, including an introduction (pp.1-8) and conclusion (pp.247-50). The book also contains a bibliography (pp.251-69) and index (pp.271-8). The book begins “the quest for a Political philosophy of *Ihsan*” by highlighting the philosophical and theological foundations of that

term, which (along with its derivatives/conjugal forms) is repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'an and Hadith collections. *Ihsan* is the ultimate state (*haal*) achieved by a believer after *iman* (faith) and *islam* (submission), as mentioned by a famous prophetic tradition known as *Hadith-e-Jibra'il*, in which the Prophet defined *ihsan* as: "to worship Allah as if you are seeing Him, if you cannot see Him, surely He sees you." Although often loosely translated as "doing beautiful deeds," *ihsan* is "loaded with theological and mystical implications" that include the meanings of "perfection, goodness, to do better, to do beautiful things and to do righteous deeds" (p.3). For the author, *ihsan* is a "composite of the values of beauty, excellence, compassion, charity, forgiveness, and devotion" (p.25). Adhering to the mystical interpretation of *ihsan*, the author not only challenges the concept of an Islamic caliphate, but also the purpose of establishing shariah, a notion exploited by extremists like ISIS and al-Qaida, creating an environment of Islamophobia around the globe. The reason for such chaos, according to the author, is "The Loss of Ihsan" (pp.9-42) from the practical sphere. To support his arguments, while putting all Muslim theologians under question, Khan selects and deliberates on two case studies: (1) Recompense for Breaking the Fast (pp.17ff) and (2) Blasphemy against Prophet Muhammad (pp.25ff.).

The author provides "a critical reading of the history of Islamic political thought" in order "to identify different iconic perspectives and approaches", as adopted by different Islamic thinkers (p.161). He claims that prior to the advent of modernity, Islamic scholars and intellectuals did not feel the need to revisit political issues, considering them to have already been "settled". Occasionally, any change they needed to make was tackled within a given legal school, not for the sake of good governance, but rather "only in response to the crisis of legitimacy" (pp.162-3). Often these solutions aimed to execute shariah laws by force. The author argues that the imposition of religious laws by force was tyrannical; religious values can only be incorporated into the lives of people and gain their best efficacy through *ihsan*, because *ihsan* and its manifestations naturally compel human agents to act according to these values in pursuit of perfection and self-elevation (pp.166-7). The author also questions those scholars who hold the view that only an exact replica of the governments of the Rightly Guided Caliphs deserve to be called Islamic, and thus the only legitimate form of Islamic government. He considers such a claim to be illogical because this early Caliphal period was a developing process. Nevertheless, the era of the Rashidun Caliphate was the best and the most sincere attempt to implement Islam as taught by the Prophet. An assessment of the period, argues the author, makes it clear that these Caliphs were innovative and held the sincere intention to make the best decisions for the *Ummah* in light of Islamic teachings. Such evaluation "opens the doors for several interesting ideas and principles" (pp.167-70).

Regarding the theories of Islamic polity and governance, these differed between the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Muslim scholars from the middle period not only aimed to preserve Islamic culture and civilisation during the nineteenth century, but also looked for opportunities “to shape the Muslim world’s post-colonial political reality”. As the author opines, such responses can be classified into four: (1) secular Muslims who wanted political independence for the West while intellectually and culturally embracing it; (2) those scholars who wanted to “revive the old institution of the Caliphate”; (3) those Muslim thinkers who accepted the idea of nation-states and aspired to create an Islamic State that could be used to unite Muslims globally; and (4) the adherent of “the Modernist vision of Islamic Democracy”, who maintained that “democracy is indispensable for Islamic governance and striving for democracy and Islamic governance is one and the same thing” (pp.195-208).

In his seventh chapter, “*Ihsan* and Good Governance” (pp.209-46), Khan proposes a broad model of good governance that goes beyond merely implementing shariah or claiming that Islamic governance will realise virtuous outcomes such as social justice, tolerance, acceptance, compassion and peace. Instead, the author proposes a model for good governance based on five principles: (1) from *tawhid* (divine unity) to sovereignty; (2) from Righteous Caliphs to the Prophet; (3) from structure to process, government to governance; (4) from national interest to national virtue; and (5) from virtues to social condition (justice). With the application of these principles, good governance is expected. Such a change is impossible, however, in the absence of a “society of Mohsins” because the “virtues of the state and virtues of the society co-constitute each other” and “there cannot be one without the other”. Against this backdrop, Khan also presents five principles for the virtuous society: (1) citizenship as witness to the divine; (2) citizens as character builders; (3) citizens as lawmakers; (4) citizenship as self-regulation; and (5) citizens as rulers (pp.227-46). By achieving such traits, society becomes a “society of Mohsins” and thus paves the way for another shift(s) in governance, which the author calls “from Law Enforcement to Self-Regulation” and “from God Governance to good(ness) governance”. In such a state and society, a citizen enjoys different types of freedom: (1) freedom to do *ijtihad* (independent reasoning); (2) freedom to challenge existing *ijma* (consensus); (3) freedom to be or not to be a Muslim; and (4) freedom to be a partner in governance (pp.240ff). By these points, the author wants all Muslims to “move from the realization of religious symbolism to demanding good governance” and “to strive for creating a society that defends national virtue and generates institutions and practices that provide good governance”.

Although some Muslim scholars may harbour theological reservations about Khan’s text, its stand on issues like the recompense for breaking the fast,

blasphemy laws, *ihsan*, why Sunnis excluded justice from the principles of *din* (religion), and why *ihsan* and justice are not mentioned in *maqasid al-shariah* (the objectives of shariah) makes it a valuable and unique contribution to the subject, one that attempts to position *ihsan* as a prerequisite for good governance. Via such deliberations on Islamic political thought, based on “compassionate Islamic principles and values”, the author paves the way towards convincing the modern mind of the universal nature of an Islam rooted in love, compassion, comfort and peace to others.