

Book Review

Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan by MA Muqtedar Khan,
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In an age, when Islamophobia is rampant, it is important to actualize the divine promise so rather than fearing Islam and Muslims, the world is reassured that Islam and Muslims are here to bring love, compassion and comfort to others. The Qur'an is described itself as *Shifa* and *Rahmah*(healing and mercy) for the believers (Q. 17:82) and Prophet Muhammad is described as mercy to all the worlds(Q. 21:107).So, both the messenger and the message of God are described as mercy for all populace. In this context, the book argues that Prophet Muhammad instructed believers,“*God has ordained Ihsan in all spheres*” then why not in politics and outline a vision of transition from politics to politics based on *Ihsan* – a model of good governance. Consisting of Eight chapters, including introduction and conclusion, it spans around 300 pages. The summery of all chapters is reviewed underneath:

The chapter-1 “Introduction: The Quest for a political Philosophy of *Ihsan*”(pp.1-8)explores the main purpose of book ‘to bring *Ihsan* (beautiful deeds) in Politics.’The book essentially employs two methodological gambits ‘(1) deconstruct existing orthodoxy, the discourses of the ‘political Islam and Jihadism’ of both the moderate and radical –that has eventually led to the idea of the modern Islamic state and the predominantly ‘Islamist notion that the implementation of Islamic law (*Sariah*) as the purpose of an Islamic state’(2) reconstituting a more mystical thought, encourage Muslims to engage in a conversation about thinking, realizing and working towards an *Ihsan* based politics. The book seeks to channel and guide the favour for Islam based politics that will nurture compassion, mercy and love in societies rather than those that seek to forcibly implement *Shariah*. The author contends that from over 1400 hundreds, a lot of ink has been spent on understanding *Ihsan* but only in context of personal and interpersonal relations, but the book wants to impart *Ihsan* in political realms. The famous hadith of Gabriel, wherein He asked Prophet Muhammad, “what is *Ihsan*?” the Prophet responded, “*to worship Allah as if you see him, if you can't see him, Surely He sees you*” is the main source of the book. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the structure and the content of the book.

In Chapter-2 'The loss of *Ihsan*' (pp. 9-42) the author maintains that the central message of Islam is mercy. The author claims that 'the Muslim voices that purport to speak on behalf of Islam have departed from the ethos of *Ihsan*'. He cites the Qur'anic verse "*whoever kills an innocent soul, it is as though he has killed all humanity*" (5:32) and argues if we are to take the legal meanings of the verse seriously then one cannot pronounce death penalty for the adultery, fornication, sorcery, apostasy and even blasphemy. While discussing the development of *Shariah* he points out that religiosity and identity have become synonymous and Islam has been reduced to an identity (p.12). The rest of this chapter employs two case studies to make the point. One case study is a routine one, simply – how to make up for breaking a Ramadhan fast – basically a discussion of how a completely non-political issue has led to an understanding of Islamic sources without the compassion inherent in the Prophet's *Sunnah* and the other about a contentious and highly political issue of blasphemy punishment in Pakistan in an environment that is pregnant with religious, cultural and geopolitical conflict (p.16). The author argues that in both the cases, we find that the *Shariah* sources are very benign but the *Fiqh* is very harsh. Particularly in both the cases, generally in existing political philosophy, the understanding of divine sources and their legal interpretations neglects the dimension of *Ihsan*.

In both cases, author generalizes the Islamic rulings, the 'hadith regarding the compensation of Fasting' and the Qur'anic verse 5:32. However, on observing deeply, the hadith explicitly is for those who can't afford the first three compensations and the *Sha'rah* – Prophet Muhammad was himself alive on the occasion, He has the right to modify the Islamic rulings. The Qur'anic verse is about the *innocent* killing, the question ascends here whether the one who commits adultery, fornication, sorcery, apostasy is an *innocent* or not? Furthermore, the another claimed that *Fiqh* has developed in such a way that it eschews *Ihsan*/ excludes mercy of God slowly but systematically from Islamic rulings and is very harsh, but on analyzing deeply, one can surely acknowledge the description of Legal laws (*Fiqh*) is constructed on *Ihsan*. How can it be possible that all jurists will eschew *Ihsan* – the highest level of religion – when the Prophetic Muhammad gives assurance that "*Allah will not cause my Ummah to agree on falsehood.*"

The chapter third (3) 'Islam as Identity: After a century of Islamic Revivalism' (pp.43-76) explores the Prophetic tradition, which inspired Muslim revivalists "*Indeed, Allah will send at the beginning of every century, to this community, one who will revive their*

religion from them.” He argues that ‘it is difficult to identify which individual was the *Mujaddid*.’ Furthermore, the chapter critically examines the Muslims’ responses to the challenges of modernity in four categories – traditionalist, modernists, Islamists and secular – and seeks to answer a fundamental question ‘why Muslims lost their *mojo*?’ in their theories. The Islamists believe that the reason is Muslims have abandoned the path of Shariah – if Muslims implement the true Shariah, they would once again be glorious like their predecessors’ (p.47), and traditionalists believe ‘Muslim decline is a wholesale abandonment of Islamic way of life, particularly of Islamic rituals.’ The Modernists worry over the disappearance of key principles and process from Muslim society. Their central focus and overall cause is the intellectual decline of the Muslim society. Unlike all the approaches, ‘the secularists have tended to blame religion for the deficit and the absence of democracy and modernization in Muslim societies’ (p.54). The next portion of the chapter demonstrates how global Islamic revivalism has reduced Islam to an identity. The author writes; ‘the biggest impact of Islamism, in my analysis, has the reduction of Islam to the status of ideology’ (p.57) and how they reduced acceptable modernity to science and rejecting everything else as ‘atheistic materialism’ and western culture. The author tried to show how contemporary Muslim politicians, have deviated from its normative purpose.

Chapter-4 ‘*Ihsan: Classical and Contemporary Understanding*’ (Pp.77-102) explores how the Qur’an and Hadith literature and in pre-modern (past and the recent past) Islamic scholarship presents *Ihsan*. The author explores the concept of *Ihsan* (literally means to make more beautiful) and other interrelated phrases like *Al-Husna* (literally means the good) from the Qur’anic vocabulary like 2:195 and 13:18 etc. and both the phrases are conjugations of the same root *h-s-n*. He further deems ‘*Ihsan* is the highest form or a dimension of Islam that sought to highlight goodness, virtue and beauty in devotion and the final destiny of the true believer’ (p.79). Furthermore, he argues that Imam Abu Haneefah in *Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar*, ‘completely ignores the concept of *Ihsan*’ and Ibn Taymiyyah in his definitive work, *Kitab Al-Iman*, on the hadith of Gabriel ‘identifies three ranks of the religion and he places *Ihsan* as the highest rank followed by *Iman* and the *Islam*.’ Al-Ghazali in his magnum opus *Ihya Uloom*, too refers to hadith of Gabriel, but he unlike others is more interested in how *Ihsan* can be realized. Ibn Arabi ‘constructs an entire cosmology of *Ihsan*’ and Jalaluddin Rumi treats ‘*Ihsan* as a divine love the divine union’. The author reviews two books (both in Arabic) on the theme of *Ihsan* from the Muslim world – one by Salafi leaning scholar namely Sheikh Hassan from Egypt and another by Sufi leader namely Sheikh Yassine from

Morocco. Furthermore, the chapter presents the discussion of William Chittack and Sheikh Hisham Kabbani's on *Ihsan* from Western world. The author asserts that the purpose of extending the discussion about *Ihsan* is to emphasize 'how *Ihsan* has slowly disappeared from the Muslim collective memory'.

The Chapter-5 (five) 'Unveiling Ihsan: From the Cosmic View of Worldview' (pp.103-159) explores author's own understanding of *Ihsan*. He referred hadith of Gabriel as *Umm al-Hadeeth* (the mother of traditions) and maintains at a face value, it appears to be simply, but it's like swimming in an ocean with one's back to the shore.' (p.111). The author selected few verses to convey the summary of how the Qur'an reveals the idea of *Ihsan*. Furthermore, the author claims that *Ihsan* in its various forms occurs 191 times in 175 verses of the Qur'an (p.110), over 190 mentions of the various conjugations of the Arabic root *h-s-n* in the Qur'an and in three important Prophetic traditions. Based on these selections, author claims that achieving the state of *Ihsan* is the purpose of human beings. The author also examines the Qur'anic phrase *Muhsin* in exegetical works, in the Sufi treatise and re-counts the phrase with the Sufi concepts of *Baqa* and *Fanaa*. In the next section of this chapter, the author attempts to unpack the concept of *Ihsan* and some of its dimensions as principles that can become the foundations of a building blocks of political philosophy of good governance. The author's focus is on the following eight elements of the state of *Ihsan* – (1) *Mushahada* (witnessing), (2) *Muraqaba* (vigilance), (3) *Muhabba* (love), (4) *Husn* (aesthetics), (5) *Rehmah* (forgiveness), (6) *Sadaqa* (Charity) and (7) *Ma'rifah* (epistemology) (8) *Fanaa* (Self-annihilation) – and envisions *Ihsan* as a complex philosophy that includes an epistemology, the spiritual act of witnessing God, as political forgiveness, as anti-identity politics (*Fanaa*), as a pursuit of excellence, as self-criticism and as steadfastness.

The sixth chapter, 'Islamic Political Philosophy: A Critical Genealogy' (Pp.161-208) presents a critical genealogy of Islamic political philosophy and its development from the era of rightly guided Caliphs to the Arab Spring. The author chooses five classical thinkers who contributed to the Islamic political thought 'from entirely distinct and different perspectives' like Al-Farabi – 'a philosopher and his approach was normative', Al Mawardi – a jurist and he approached Islamic political thought from legalistic perspective', Ibn Taymiyyah – a theologian and a polemicist and he approached politics from the perspective of theology' and Ibn Khaldun – was many things but his outstanding dimension of his political thought was his emphasis on empiricism. The author also discusses contemporary

political thinkers such as Syed Qutb, Maulana Mawdudi, Ayotullah Khomeini and Al-Nabbhani etc. and argues that ‘the foundational thinkers of modern Islamism, basically relied on the works of Al-Mawardi, Ibn Taymiyyah and a selective reading of the Rashidun Caliphate.’ The chapter concludes with a critique of existing political thought and presents a review of Sufi understanding of politics and the preliminary ideas advanced by Sufi’s thinkers like Sheikh Saa’di – a Persian Sufi poet, who was very close to articulate a mystical view of political philosophy based on the concept of *Ihsan*. Moreover, the author explores the diversity within Islamic political thought in order to emphasize the ‘Shariah-based’ politics is only one way of thinking of Islamic politics.

Chapter seven (7) ‘*Ihsan* and Good Governance’ (Pp.209- 246) is the key chapter of the book, that outline a vision of politics based on *Ihsan*. The author criticized the political thought which emphasis on structure and law instead on process which will yield more benefits for society. This chapter further constitute a state of *Ihsan* by providing an alternative paradigm of Islamic governance that is quite different from the ‘Islamists and Jihadis’ and generally distinctive from existing political philosophy and goes beyond the elementary idea of just to implement Islamic laws, but the realization of virtuous outcomes. The author contends that the political community is co-constituted by both the state and society, have power to shape their collective reality. He lay out the five principles theory based on *Ihsan* that seeks to that encourage good governance are; (1) From Tawheed to Sovereignty (2) From Righteous Caliphs to Prophet (3) From structure to process (4) National Interest to National virtue (5) Justice: From Virtue to Social Condition. Furthermore, the authors five principles theory cannot be realized in a society without *Muhsins* – those who wish to establish a State of *Ihsan*. So, in a way, these two aspects virtues of the state and the virtue of the society are co-constitute each other. He identifies the five principles that characterize the Society of *Muhsins* are; (1) Citizens as Witnesses (2) Citizens as Character Builders (3) Citizens as Lawmakers (4) Citizens as Self-regulation and (5) Citizens as rulers: From God Governance to Good Governance.

The last chapter (Eight) ‘Closing Thoughts’ (Pp.247-250) end authors ‘journey towards *Ihsan*’ and argues that I rely on the concept of *Ihsan* – a cosmology and an epistemology – that set a normative preference such as deeds over identity, love over law, and mercy over forgiveness.

The book presents an entirely different vision of politics in Islam, nevertheless there are several things that are highly contestable. For instance, the author defends his own guise 'Ihsan based stand' through Imam Abu Haneefah and his school, which does not maintain that the non-Muslim blasphemer should be killed, but on another occurrence he contends that Abu Haneefah in *Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar*, 'completely ignores the concept of *Ihsan*.' One wonders if Abu Haneefah completely ignores *Ihsan* then why not in the case of blasphemy? This displays author's cherry-picking to shield his own guise. The author's over-all draft concerning blasphemy is one-sided, instead of shielding it in scholarly fashion, he officiously nullifies the other estimation as a minority which is quite astonishing.

While disusing the five principles of Good Governance the author attempts to demonstrate an inconsistency between the Prophetic model and Pious Caliphate model, and submits the problem with the theory that takes Caliphate as a perfect model of governance. The author maintains that Prophet Muhammad is the model for Muslims to emulate not the pious Caliphate. If we unpack this assertion in depth, surely we can see there is no contradiction between the Prophetic and Pious Caliphate model – in fact the model was utterly constructed on Prophetic principles – he professed the model as an exemplary and instructed the Muslims to adopt their pedagogy "For those of you after me will see disagreements. You must then follow my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the rightly-guided Caliphs. Hold it and stick fast on it" (Sanan Abu Dawud, 4607). The author's second assertion, 'we can see no specific Sunnah of Prophet or of the previous Caliph was being followed by anyone in the matter of succession. But rather each caliph was innovating with sincere intentions to make the best decision for the Ummah in the light of Islamic teachings and the unique political circumstances that they faced' (p.170) is historically incorrect. For instance, Abu Bakr not only continued the Prophet's movement against *Musaylimah Kazab* (apostasy movement), but he stands firm in the unhealthiest political condition even the companions like Umar Farooq (the 2nd Caliph) insist on him to rethink on the issue. In fact, there are hundreds of examples that completely deconstruct this assertion.

While evaluating Islamist movements the episode reads 'The Muslim Brotherhood and *Jammat-e-Islami* and the puritanical movements represented by Salafi Wahhabi movements have both targeted and attacked Sufism, Sufi practices and ethos' (p.187). The author on first instance deemed Muslim Brotherhood against Sufism and on another occasion he affirmed the founder of Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan Al-Banna as a Sufi. Surely, a flagrant

contradiction ensues from this assertion. He further writes ‘but when he founded the Muslim Brotherhood, he did not see it as a spiritual order’ here the question is how a Sufi influenced leader will launch a movement that will target Sufism and its ethos? The *Jammat-e Islami* neither targeted Sufism nor its practices, in fact the founder of *Jl* Maulana Mawdudi deemed *Tasawwuf* as a part of religion his famous book *Deeniyat* ‘Tasawwuf in true sense, is an intense love of Allah and Muhammad and such love requires a strict obedience to the commands in the Book of God and the *Sunnah* of his Prophet.’ If ‘Salafi Wahhabi’ movements here mean contemporary Salafi then one can somewhat agree, but if it means the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah then it is surely an accusation, because it was pantheistic mysticism which he opposed, for he himself was the traditional, non-Ittihadī Sufī. Both Ibn Taymiyyah and Mawdudi were not against nor targeting Sufism but its speculative mysticism that they opposed.

The book overall did not evaluate Ibn Taymiyyah justly, once argued that *Daesh* is the outcome of the political philosophy of Al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah together, and on another instance, ‘*Daesh* and its leadership are heavily influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah’ and his book *Al-Sarim Al-Maslool ala Shatim Al-Rasool* (Drawn Sword against the Insulter of the Prophet) was classified as an angry response to the specific religio-political environment. Besides, the authors’ soft corner and ideological bent is apparent by writing a methodological fuss ‘none captures the essence of love in Islam better than Ibn Al-Arabi’ is undeniably an exaggeration, a vague assertion, which have no pedigree in Islamic literature. Moreover, the book inclusively presents an idea that Sufism alone has the ability to contribute towards Good Governance and often belittles other Islamist movements. In fact, the elements of Sufism that promote human rights, peace, mercy etc. are also prevalent in non-Sufi interpretations.

Keeping apart these shortcomings, the book is significant achievement, a remarkable feat of interdisciplinary scholarship and provides an alternative paradigm for Islamic political philosophy by mending the concept of *Ihsan*.

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