Introduction to Islam and Good Governance:
An Interdisciplinary Symposium

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The Symposium

It is a great honor for me to present these exceptionally thoughtful and eclectic collection of essays by a highly interdisciplinary panel of distinguished scholars. We have an anthropologist, two from the field of international affairs, one political theorist, two scholars of Islamic studies, an economist, and a public policy scholar on the roster. In this peer-reviewed symposium, we are using the theoretical and philosophical provocations I have advanced in my recent book, *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan*, to have an interdisciplinary conversation about Islamic values and governance. While some scholars have directly engaged with the book and its ideas providing critical insights as well as insightful critique, others have used it as a point of departure to explore the relationship between Islamic values and governance. The symposium also includes an annotated bibliography of key sources on Islam and good governance. This symposium is the first of hopefully a series of symposia on good governance with the goal to ensure that values are never neglected in pursuit of effective governance. Every

symposium will include essays by scholars and an annotated bibliography compiled by a graduate student.

The Book: Why Can't Politics be Beautiful?
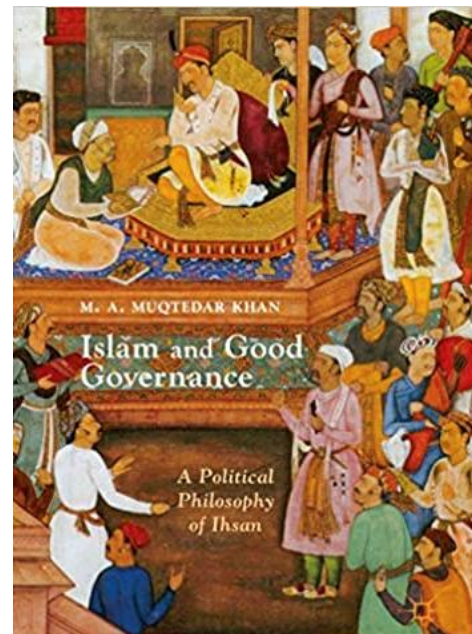
In *Islam and Good Governance*, I present an approach to governance that departs radically from the dominant Islamist imagination of an Islamic state that seeks to impose *Shariah* (Islamic laws) using the coercive tools of the state on its citizens. Additionally, this model of imposing or "implementing" the *Shariah* as a litmus test of Islamicness of states has raised questions about Islam's compatibility with democracy, pluralism, and religious freedom.[1] I

advocate an alternate vision of an Islamic polity – a state of *Ihsan* – an approach to governance based on *Ihsan* (to do beautiful things) that privileges love over law along with freedom of religion and thought over enforced adherence to religious mores. Most importantly I favor process (good governance) over government structure (Islamic state) and ethics over realpolitik.[2]

Another important goal of my book is to demonstrate that over time Muslim political thinkers have imagined politics and polities from very diverse perspectives.[3] Relying on the archetypes of foundational Islamic thinkers like Al-Farabi, Al-Mawardi, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Saadi of Shiraz, I show that Muslims have theorized politics from perspectives that include philosophy, theology, sociological realism, jurisprudence, and mysticism. The point is that the *Shariah*-based Islamic polity that contemporary Islamists advocate is just one way of imagining Islamic politics. There are other ways of realizing Islam in the public sphere, which are also more compatible with democracy, pluralism, and inclusion, such as the Medinan model (pp. 215-217). It is crucial for

Muslims who desire a public role for Islam to be aware of this rich diversity in their heritage.

The final and most important reason for writing this book was to explore more deeply the concept of *Ihsan*, unanimously considered the highest virtue in Islam, and envision how *Ihsan* can be realized in the political sphere. *Ihsan* means to do beautiful things, to serve God as if you see him, or at least be cognizant of the fact that he sees you all the time.[4] In a way, both God and his servant are witnessing and witnessed by the other. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said that God has commanded *Ihsan* in all things, so why not in politics? *Islam and Good Governance* endeavors to show how *Ihsan* can make politics beautiful. Regardless of its limitations, I believe it is a unique contribution to Islamic political thought and I hope it inspires many Muslims and non-Muslims to engage in virtuous politics.

In chapters four and five, I elucidate how the Islamic intellectual heritage explored the meaning of *Ihsan* and, based on that reading, I advance a public philosophy of *Ihsan*. Even if the readers have profound disagreements

with my political vision, I hope they at least find these two chapters beneficial. We have relegated *Ihsan* to spiritual practices; it is time to unleash its potential in the political sphere. I recognize that the highly ethical and compassionate vision of the state – the State of *Ihsan* – that I have presented may be too idealistic for Muslim nations mired in realpolitik internationally and identity politics domestically. Yet, I am hopeful that it will start a conversation about imagining Islamic politics based on love, compassion, inclusion, and forgiveness in academia, on social media, in policy circles, and at kitchen tables.

The Essays

I am both humbled and delighted by the essays in this symposium. They not only place my contribution in perspective but also raise several interesting issues that need further exploration and point to new ways of thinking about Islam and politics. I see the discussion here exemplary of the Islamic spirit of *Ihsan* captured so beautifully in the well-known tradition *'Al-Deen Al-Naseehah,'* that religion in essence is sincere counsel.[5] Robert Hefner is especially generous in his

praise and, coming from such a distinguished and renowned scholar, it does mean a lot to me. He does, however, ask a very pertinent question – is it not possible to achieve most of what I advocate through an application of the *maqasid al-shariah* approach (higher purposes of *Shariah*) as advocated by Jasser Auda and others?[6] Hefner is right, that the already established idea and approach of *maqasid* could be a vehicle to implement many of the virtues I advocate.[7]

However, I have two reservations with regards to this idea. One of my goals is to reduce the domination of legalism in Islamic thought as I see it as the main cause for the loss of *Ihsan* in the *fiqhi* discourse (pp. 9-42). The *maqasid* approach is another form of legalism and it will, in my view, perpetuate the loss of *Ihsan*. Secondly, as I discuss in *Islam and Good Governance* (p. 223), I find it troubling that Islamic jurists find defense of lineage as an important goal of Islamic *Shariah* and not justice or freedom. The five higher purposes of divine law according to the *maqasid* approach are protection of life, property, religion, lineage, and reason. I consider this list without justice (*adl*) and *Ihsan* as a not

very beautiful way of divining the divine purpose. Hefner is correct though – I am trying to chart a new pathway to good governance.

I consider Asma Afsaruddin as my teacher (she is not to blame for my many flaws and limitations). When it comes to classical scholarship on the Qur'an, early Muslims, and on the theory as well as practice of *Jihad*, she is second to none. Her participation in this symposium is an honor for me. Afsaruddin pushes back, albeit gently, against my argument critical of the canonization of the *Khulafa-e-Rashidun* as the orthodox model of Islamic governance. I instead advocate the example of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and his governance – the Medinan model – as the standard of good governance to emulate (pp. 203-205 and 215-217). Afsaruddin reminds us that the first four caliphs where selected primarily for their virtue and moral excellence (*fadila*).[8] She, however, makes my case for me when she also points out that later scholars like Al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah muddy the idea of moral excellence by infusing and moderating it with realpolitik. I am with Afsaruddin all the way. My criticism of the *Khulafa-e-*

Rashidun model is based on how it is presented in Islamic thought, while Afsaruddin's appreciation for it is based on what it really was.

Of all the contributors, Peter Mandaville is the closest to me in training and research focus. We are both scholars of international affairs focusing on Islam and politics. He is of course a much more accomplished scholar than I. It is no surprise that he has written a much better summation of my main arguments than I have in any of the essays I have published so far trying to explain my objectives in *Islam and Good Governance*. He even picked on subtle elements such as the observation that I am advocating *Ihsan* and not Sufism as practiced today.[9] Yet, his main question, which is also the sticking point for Robert Hefner and Amir Ullah Khan, regarding how do I get from philosophy of *Ihsan* to praxis of *Ihsan* is very important. My answer is: in baby steps. I have moved from cosmology to philosophy, and the next stage to praxis will be, including TEDx talks, lectures and sermons, symposia like this one, perhaps even a global conference on *Ihsan* (in the future). The key here is the journey towards the destination, not just reaching the end. Fortuitously, two days

before the publication of this symposium on October 29, 2020, in a widely listened to TEDx talk, I made the case for how principles of *Ihsan* can combat America's two biggest challenges, structural racism and income inequality. I believe the journey towards *Ihsan* has begun already.

Amir Ullah Khan's response is what I imagine Ibn Khaldun would have said after reading my book – all this is fine, but what about the empirical realities of the existing world? Khan is a renowned economist, who brings *Ihsan* into his political activism on behalf of oppressed minorities in India. Khan's major point is how can we advance an ethical political reform agenda without taking into account the economic impediments to reform and causes for current miseries? He also suggests that the absence of *Ihsan* may be because of economic injustices, suffering, and huge inequities that persist in Muslim nations.[10] I accept Khan's criticism that my analysis as well as my solution is grounded in ideational terms. I did chart a way forward in chapter seven of the book (pp. 209-246), but that too is ethico-political in nature. I hope my book inspires scholars like Khan to revisit the loss of *Ihsan*, which he does

not contest, and advance solutions from a political economy perspective.

Omid Safi is a prominent Muslim public intellectual, besides being a serious scholar of Sufism. He emphasizes the importance of *Ihsan* understood as love in his scholarship and his activism for social justice in America. In *Islam and Good Governance,* I speak of love (*Muhabba*) as one of the seven elements of *Ihsan* (pp. 136-145). Safi takes Ihsan as love.[11] In his response, he strongly advocates that one way through which American Muslims can bring *Ihsan* into their lives along with face the challenges of social injustices is by drinking from the well of love in the African American struggle for freedom (The Civil Rights Movement) and centering the role of African American Muslims. It was fascinating to me to see how Safi understands the verse on justice and *Ihsan* (Quran 16:90) by reading it as love and justice. I too contemplate this important verse, but to argue that God is telling us that justice is not enough, it also needs *Ihsan* – compassion, vigilance, love, mercy, forgiveness, and self-effacement (pp. 222-229, and 248-249). Broadly speaking, I agree with Safi's general argument that *Ihsan* is an antidote to

racism. In a public lecture given at University of Alberta on October 7, 2020, I discussed how *Ihsan* can serve as a remedy to racism in North America.[12] I also make the same argument in a Friday sermon given to the community of Cordoba House, New York, that two dimensions of *Ihsan, Muraqaba* (vigilance) and *Fanaa* (self-annihilation)*,* can combat racism and inequity in America while developing a community of Muhsins (those who realize *Ihsan*).[13]

Joseph Prud'homme is an eminent scholar of Christian thought. He and I have not only engaged in dialogue and debate over the political role of Evangelical Christians in the U.S.,[14] but also have worked together on several projects stateside as well as in Europe, East Asia, and in the Middle East. He constructs a fascinating account of how, in his view, the Quakers in pursuit of a virtue much like *Ihsan* – to be guided by an inner light both in private and public spheres rather than authoritative Christian dogma – essentially became apostates from Christianity.[15] My familiarity with Quaker thought is limited to occasional lectures at Friends' High School in Delaware. So, I cannot comment much

on Prud'homme's *takfir* of Quakers.[16] Yet, I understand his point. He is afraid that, in pursuit of *Ihsan*, Muslims too might move away from the doctrinal and core teachings of Islam and, God forbid, leave the fold of Islam.

I appreciate the warning and I suspect some scholars from the school of thought broadly defined as *Salafi* Islam may confuse my advocacy for *Ihsan* as support for contemporary Sufism and actually agree with him.[17] However, I disagree completely. The idea of *Ihsan* derives both from the Quran and from the Hadith of Jibril, according to which angel Gabriel himself came to teach Muslims their religion. From the fringes of Islamic heterodoxy to the core of Islamic orthodoxy, there is consensus that *Ihsan* is the highest moral excellence one can aspire to in Islam. Even the most prominent of Salafi scholars have written about *Ihsan.* Ibn Taymiyyah, the stalwart of Salafis, also anchors his book, *Kitab al-Iman* (Book of Belief) on the Hadith of Jibril (pp. 80-82).[18] The hadith defines Islam, *Iman*, and *Ihsan.* Ibn Taymiyyah in his book focused on *Iman*, I chose to focus on *Ihsan.* I also review two major contemporary Arabic books on *Ihsan*, one by the late Sufi scholar Sheikh

Yassine of Morocco and another by a renowned Salafi scholar, Sheikh Hassan of Egypt.[19] The treatment of *Ihsan* is diametrically opposite but the sources are the same – Quran and Sunnah. In *Islam and Good Governance*, I made sure that none of my assertions strayed from the orthodox-sanctioned, authentic, sacred sources. My worry is that my vision is too idealistic to realize, not that its realization will lead to deviation.

Mohammed Ayub Khan's bibliographical essay is thoughtful and well put together.[20] In annotated bibliographies, what is not seen – the articles and books examined but not included – often far exceeds what is visible. Khan's selection of sources is well balanced; they include recent and prominent sources as well as contemporary and classical texts on Islam and Good Governance.

Acknowledgements

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the academic director of the US State Departments' National Security Institute, 2016-2019 and is the academic director of the American Foreign Policy Institute, 2019-2021, at the Institute for Global Studies, UD. He was a Senior Nonresident Fellow of the Brookings Institution (2003-2008) and a Senior Fellow with the Center for Global Policy (2017-2020). He is the author of the award-winning book *Islam and Good Governance: Political Philosophy of Ihsan* published in April 2019 by Palgrave Macmillan. He is also the author of several other books: *American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom* (2002), *Jihad for Jerusalem: Identity and Strategy in International Relations* (2004), *Islamic Democratic Discourse* (2006), *Debating Moderate Islam (*University of Utah Press, 2007). His articles and commentaries can be found at www.ijtihad.org. His academic publications can be found at https://udel.academia.edu/MuqtedarKhan. He hosts a Youtube show called Khanversations at: https://www.youtube.com/c/ProfMuqtedarKhan. Click here to read reviews, articles and view videos about *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan.*

END NOTES

[1] Philpott, Daniel. *Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

[2] Khan, M A Muqtedar. *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan*. Springer, 2019.

[3] Boroujerdi, Mehrzad (Ed.), *Mirror for the Muslim Prince: Islam and the Theory of Statecraft*. Syracuse University Press, 2013.

[4] Khan, M. A. Muqtedar, "Live Life as if you have made and Eye-Contact with God," *Islamic Horizons*, March-April issue, 2020., pp. 61-62.

[5] https://hadithcommentary.com/nawawi/hadith7/

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7 Hefner, Robert, "Ihsan Ethics and Political Revitalization: Appreciating Muqtedar Khan's Islam and Good," in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.), *Symposium on Islam and Good Governance*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, October, 2020.

8 Afsaruddin, Asma, "Negotiating Virtue and Realpolitik in Islamic Good Governance," in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.), *Symposium on Islam and Good Governance*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, October, 2020.

9 Mandaville, Peter, "Worlding the Inward Dimensions of Islam: Ihsan in Search of a Political Praxis in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.), *Symposium on Islam and Good Governance*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, October, 2020.

10 Khan, Amir Ullah. "Islam and Good Governance: A Political Economy Perspective," in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.), *Symposium on Islam and Good Governance*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, October, 2020.

11 Safi, Omid. "God commands you to Justice and Love: Islamic Spirituality and the Black-led Freedom Movement, in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.), *Symposium on Islam and Good Governance*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, October, 2020.

12 http://meis.ualberta.ca/?event=Public%20Talk%20by%20Prof.%20Khan

13 https://youtu.be/0PRLmgtuRsQ

14 https://youtu.be/pYYaC7xixVI

15 Prud'homme, Joseph. "A Tragic Beauty? Quakerism, Christian Tradition, and Secular Misconceptions: A Christian's Thoughts on the Political Philosophy of Ihsan" in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.), *Symposium on Islam and Good Governance*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, October, 2020.

16 *Takfir* is an Islamic doctrine by which one declares another as outside their doctrinal fold.

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