“God Commands You to Justice and Love”: Islamic Spirituality and the Black-led Freedom Movement

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Cornel West, widely seen as one of the most prophetic intellectuals of our generation, has famously said:

"Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public."

This teaching, bringing together love and justice, also serves as one that links together the highest aspirations of Islamic spirituality and governance (*Ihsan*) and justice (*'adl*). Within the realm of Islamic thought, Muqtedar Khan has written a thoughtful volume recently on the social and political implications of the key concept in Islamic spirituality, *Ihsan*.[1] The present essay serves to bring together these two by taking a look at some of the main insights of the Black-led Freedom Movement for Islamic governance and spirituality.

Older models for the study of mysticism—and Sufism in the context of Islam—tended to relegate spirituality to the "private realm of personal experience."[2] More recent scholarship has tended to identify that characterization as a product of Protestant tradition, and instead insists that Sufism has always had a social, and even political, dimension. This is true in the case of Naqshbandi Central Asian Sufis, South Asian Chishtis, Libyan Sanusis, Senegalese Tijanis, among others.[3]

Many studies of the social and political dimensions of Islamic spirituality have tended to look at the "Middle" period of Islamic history, from the years 1100-1600 or so. Understandably, scholarship on modern Islamic thought has tended to prioritize studies of modernist, Salafi, as well as various reformist and puritanical schools of Islamic thought instead of the Sufi tradition. I want to push against that trend here, and examine the implications of the Black-led Freedom Movement in the 1960s in the United States for helping us imagine and re-imagine models of Islamic spirituality and governance.

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The connection between the Black-led Freedom Movement (more commonly known as the Civil Rights Movement) and Islam is not so far-fetched. Until 1970, the majority of

Americans professing to be Muslim hailed from the Nation of Islam led by Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. It was only the passage of the 1965 immigration laws that made America's formal immigration law slightly less racist that the migration of Muslim doctors, engineers, and technocrats from Arab countries, South Asia, and Iran changed the demographic of the American Muslim population. Prior to this time, almost all the significant American Muslim figures such as Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and W. D. Muhammad were African-Americans who came out of the Black liberationist tradition of Nation of Islam.[4] Furthermore, iconic figures like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks were deeply aware of Muslim figures like Malcolm X, and were constantly modulating their own stances in light of the more radical social justice stances of the Nation of Islam. While many people have looked at the centrality of love and nonviolence for the practice of the Civil Rights Movement, not many have sought to similarly center the teachings of *Ihsan* for the American Muslim experience.[5]

The connection between love and spirituality in Islam goes back to the foundational passage in the Qur'an (16:90):

إِنَّ اللهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ

Inna 'laha ya'miru bi 'l-adl wa 'l-ihsan

"Indeed, God commands you to Justice and Love."

The term translated here as Love is none other than *Ihsan*. The spiritual background of the word *Ihsan* in Islamic thought goes back to the famed Hadith of Gabriel, which states:

أَنْ تَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ كَأَنَّكَ تَرَاهُ، فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُنْ تَرَاهُ فَإِنَّهُ يَرَاكَ

Ihsan is that you worship God as if you see Him
And if you don't see Him, remember that He nevertheless sees you.

[Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim][6]

The term *Ihsan* has been translated variously as "virtue" and "excellence." It's helpful to remember that the concept of *Ihsan* comes from the same Arabic trilateral root system (H-S-N) that means both Good and Beautiful. *Ihsan* is the very process of bringing goodness and beauty here and now and making them real. *Ihsan*, then,

is nothing short of the *realization* of goodness and beauty.

In the Hadith of Gabriel quoted above, *Ihsan* is listed as the highest level of the spiritual path: first comes the actions related to the path, named as submitting of oneness to the spiritual path (such as testimony of Divine unity, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, charity). This is the level of *Islam*, that of a wholehearted and engaged surrender to the Divine will. Then comes *Iman* (faith), which is faith in God, the messengers, the scriptures, angels, predestination, and the day (of resurrection and judgement). Above both of these levels is *Ihsan*, which is a more subtle realm, not merely to do the prayers, not merely to worship God, and not merely to do so while having faith in God, but to do so as if one is witnessing (*mushahda*) God, and if not, to remember that one is always beheld by God.

While there are slight variations in the multiple versions of this famed Hadith, occasionally said to be the most important saying of the Prophet, in the version in the Sahih Muslim (one of two most influential Hadith collections in Sunni Islam), the order goes from Islam to Iman and ultimately to Ihsan. One can do the right religious deeds (including prayer) without faith having permeated one's heart. This, in fact, seems to be the very insight mentioned in the Qur'an when a group of Arab nomads come to the Prophet asking him to bear witness that they have faith in God. The Prophet is commanded to say that while they have submitted themselves to God and are performing the right deeds (literally, that they are *islam*-ing), faith has not yet taken root in their heart.

قَالَتِ الْاَعْرَابُ اٰمَنَّا ؕ قُلْ لَّمْ تُؤْمِنُوْا وَلٰكِنْ قُوْلُوْٓا
اَسْلَمْنَا وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ الْاِيْمَانُ فِيْ قُلُوْبِكُمْ

[Qur'an 49:14]

The great Muslim poet and sage Rumi confirms this. In his *Fihi Ma Fihi*, he states that better than prayer is the soul of prayer, and better than prayer (key dimension of "Islam" above) is faith ("Iman") since prayer takes place a few times a day, but faith is continuous; prayer can be stopped or even postponed, but faith is ongoing.[7]

Ihsan is an even higher rank. *Ihsan* is about seeing God, and none other than God. *Ihsan* is also about

transcending the ego to the point that one even if he does not see God, is conscious of being seen by God. It's for that reason the entire realm of Islamic spirituality is associated with *Ihsan*. As such, one can say that the whole realm of love, beauty, spirituality, and aesthetics have to do with *Ihsan*. In that sense, the entire domain of Islamic spirituality – also called the Sufi tradition but also goes beyond that to include many genres of Islamic poetry, music, philosophy, *Hikmat* (wisdom traditions), *Batini* (esoteric, often traced to Ismai'ili teachings) dimensions, and Shi'i gnosis – is concerned with *Ihsan*.

This spiritual tradition took a special interest in the weak, the marginalized, the broken, and the suffering. The Sufis of the path of *Ihsan* were fond of quoting a Hadith *Qudsi* traced back to the Prophet Muhammad in which God whispered to him:

I am with those
whose hearts
are broken.[8]

A Sufi no less prominent than Rumi identified the real chivalrous lovers as those who run down towards those who are hurting and suffering, as water would rush from the high and safe ground to the low ground.

A dragon was devouring a bear

A brave one
With heart of a lion
Heard the poor creature cry out

These are the brave ones:
Who tend to the lament of the oppressed

Whenever they hear
the heart's anguish of those oppressed
They come running
Like God's mercy

These are the ones who hold up the world
Healing diseases of the heart

They are:
Pure love
Justice
Mercy

Someone asked the brave soul
Why did you come running
When everyone ran away?

He said:
I came
because
I heard his cry

And saw his sorrow

Wherever there is pain
The remedy runs towards it

Wherever there is lowliness
The water flows towards it

If you seek
The water of mercy

Go
Become humble
Drink the wine of mercy
Become drunk like this

Mercy upon mercy
Will enfold you

[Rumi, Masnavi, 2:1932 ff]

For Rumi, this Radical Love (‘*Ishq*) is like the waters of life itself, always flowing like mercy to those “at the bottom.” This is the “pure love” that pours outward as justice, all mingled with mercy. As it has been said, when love pours outward it becomes justice, but when it moves inward, we recognize it as tenderness.[9]

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With that background, I would like to make a transition to a conversation about the Black-led Freedom Movement, that which commonly is referred to as the Civil Rights Movement. I write as both a student of the Movement and a participant in the ongoing struggle against what Dr. King referred to as the triple giant of evil: racism, materialism, and militarism. I was honored to be asked to speak in the 50th annual commemoration of Dr. King’s assassination at the 2018 ceremony on the spot of his martyrdom, The National Civil Rights Museum at Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN.
In 2019, I was invited back as the keynote speaker in the same ceremony.[10]

My connection to the Black-led Freedom Movement has been immeasurably enriched by having a chance to be mentored by one of the giants of this movement, Vincent Harding. “Uncle Vincent” to all of us who knew and loved him—and love him still. It was Vincent Harding who wrote the first draft of Dr King’s most controversial speech, the “Beyond Vietnam” address in which Dr. King came out against the Vietnam War.[11] That speech, delivered at New York City’s Riverside Church on April 4th, 1967, came a year to the day before

Martin Luther King was assassinated on the balcony of Room 306 in Lorraine Motel. The opposition to war, the positive insistence on a peace that mingles with justice, the ongoing struggle for racial justice, as well as the dismantling of the systems, structures, and institutions that inflict harm on weak and the vulnerable have never been separate from the concern for love.

Love, of course, had been the central leitmotif of Martin Luther King's teachings. Dr. King was clear that love for him was not about mere sentimentality. In particular, Martin Luther King was fond of stating that love is not "emotional bosh":

> *"And I say to you, I have also decided to stick to love. For I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love, I'm talking about a strong, demanding love.*
>
> *And I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love."*

Other giants of the Freedom Movement, like Rev. Jim Lawson, clearly connected love to nonviolence. For Lawson, who was a close reader of Gandhi, it was abundantly clear that if you love God, you love God's creation; and if you love God's creation, you would not and could not inflict violence on them. Love for Lawson and so many in the Freedom Movement led directly to a commitment to nonviolence. In Lawson's model of social

transformation, there had to be a balance between tearing down old structures and building up new ones, and he urged his considerable following to remember that "we are merely in the prelude to revolution, the beginning, not the end, not even the middle."[12]

One of the lasting ways in which Jim Lawson left an indelible mark in bringing together love and social change was by impacting a group of young, Black, and committed university students. In 1960, this group of university students met at Shaw University in Raleigh, NC. The gathering was convened by the powerful Ella Baker, whose view of grassroots leadership stood in contrast to the top down model of Dr. King's own Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The chairperson of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in time would become none other than John Lewis. Martin Luther King spoke at that initial SNCC gathering, but the students were even more inspired by Jim Lawson's commitment linking together love, justice, and nonviolence. SNCC, whose members continued to push Martin to embrace more radical stances, came up with the following Statement of Purpose:

> *We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step toward such a society.*
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> *Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice.*
>
> *The redemptive*

community supersedes systems of gross social immorality. Love is the central motif of nonviolence.

Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love. By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.[13]

While the terminology of Judeo-Christian leaves out Muslims, there is so much to build upon. To begin with, it is the notion of love as not only a matter of faith, but one of action. The linking together of *iman* and '*amal* (practice) is a constant theme in Islamic thought. Martin Luther King, in particular, always reminded his followers that the goals we aspire to should be consistent with our means; that unjust means cannot be used to get to a just end.

Equally provocative for Muslims is the phrase in SNCC's statement about love:

Such love goes to the extreme

This notion about love is deeply resonant for Muslims, who developed the teachings of '*Ishq* (*Eshq* in Persian) to mean love when it goes to extreme, *Hubb* (loving-kindness) or *Mahabba* when it exceeds all bounds. I have rendered '*Ishq* as Radical Love.[14] That definition goes back at least to the *Ikhwan al-Safa* (Brethren of Purity) and the philosopher al-Kindi (d. 870) who both defined '*Ishq* ("Radical Love") as *ifrat al-mahabba* (excess of loving-kindness). '*Ishq* is a love that goes too far, that goes beyond reason and rationality, and takes on a dangerous kind of unselfishness. Almost the

entirety of the romantic poetry tradition in Islam, legendary tales like Layla and Majnun, Shirin and Khosrow, Yusuf and Zuleikha, deal with this theme of Radical Love. The Muslim devotees of *'Ishq* would have been fully at home with Martin Luther King and SNCC's ideas about a love that goes to the extreme.

But as Martin Luther King had described, '*Ishq* is not mere sentimentality. In fact, it is deeper and wider than human love. Rumi has a powerful poem in which he clearly comes to identify *'Ishq* as nothing less than the very being of God, unleashed upon this world. Radical Love is the Divine outpouring that brings creation into being, that sustains us here, and if we can rise above our own ego and merge that with love, it will someday carry us back home.[15]

In the radical love tradition, this '*Ishq* has to lead us to a passionate concern with and for our fellow human being. The South Asian 20th century mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan, the first known Sufi to have come to Europe and North America, stated: "The heart closed to humanity means the heart closed to God." Shaykh Sa'di, the sage of Shiraz, said:

It's no great skill
to conquer the whole world

If you can
love someone.[16]

A female mystic, 'Aisha' bint Abu 'Uthman was asked about the need to show beautiful conduct towards humanity. She answered:

Whosoever loves the Artist
glorifies the art.[17]

Early Islamic texts on governance identified the goal as building what was referred to as the *al-Madinat al-Fadila*, the Virtuous City. This was the title of the famed text written by al-Farabi, who did much to harmonize Greek wisdom with prophetic dispensation. This City of Virtue is a city built on virtue, on *ihsan*, a piety and loveliness that swells up inside the hearts of humanity rather than being imposed from the above. In the parlance of the Black-led Freedom Movement, this community may be called the Beloved Community. And, of course, we cannot have the Beloved Community without having love. Love has to be the core of the Beloved Community.

Let us conclude with a story from the early Persian Sufi Kharaqani, whose life demonstrates the linkage of love and care for the most vulnerable amongst us, starting with those in our immediate community.

Once there were two brothers, who
lived with their mother.
Every night one brother would devote
himself to serving the
mother,
whereas the other brother occupied
himself with worshiping
God.

One night the brother who worshiped
God had a dream, in
which he heard a voice from Beyond
telling him:
"We have forgiven your brother,
and for his sake, have forgiven you as
well."

The brother said: "But I have occupied
myself with worshiping
God,
whereas he has occupied himself with
serving our mother.
You are forgiving me for his sake?"

He heard the voice of God say:
"That which you do for me, I have no
need for.
But your mother needs the service your
brother provides."[18]

But your mother needs you.
Your brother needs you.
Your sister needs you.
The orphan needs you.
The homeless need you.
You need you.
The stranger needs you.
The refuge needs you.
Humanity needs you.
Nature needs you.

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In conclusion, it might be helpful to talk about why this topic seemed relevant in this particular moment where the cry of Black Lives Matter is raised all over the world, and we have a mass movement of people demanding that the police not shoot and kill black folks.

In the last generation, we have had a significant number of scholars ranging from Sherman Jackson and Edward Curtis to Zareena Grewal, Sylvia

Chan-Malik, and Juliane Hammer insist that the study of American Islam center the experience of Black Muslims—the community that until 1970 formed the majority of the American Muslim population and may still be the largest single group of American Muslims. Yet there has been a long debate about the extent to which the Black American Muslim community can generate its own normative and authoritative models of Islam without relying on Arab (usually Middle Eastern or North African) training and institutions. Some Black American scholars (most particularly Sherman Jackson) have tried to deal with the question of Black Suffering, but in order to articulate a "Normative" understanding of Islam that could withstand scrutiny, have stayed away from dealing with the Black-led Freedom Movement's Christian roots, or the Sufi tradition, or Shi'ism, all of which have profound elements that deal with the questions of suffering.

I'd like to propose that the American Muslim community, highlighting the central role played by the Black Muslim community, can use the conversation about love and justice as a bridge to tap into both the deepest *Ihsan* dimension of Islam and the profound legacy of the Black-led Freedom Movement. Many veterans of the Civil Rights Movement from Cornel West to Rev. Barber and Harry Belafonte have reached out to Muslims during the last few years in an effort of solidarity with this community which has been (along with Hispanics, African Americans, and so many others) at the crosshairs of the Trump administration. Perhaps it's past time for American Muslims to also tap into the teachings and legacy of the Freedom Movement to return the favor, by connecting with the Love-and-Justice tradition that is equally at home in the prophetic dimension of Christianity and the *Ihsan* dimension of Islam.

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frequently sought out Muslim public intellectuals in popular media, appearing in The New York Times, Newsweek, Washington Post, PBS, NPR, NBC, CNN, and other international media. His most recent book is Radical Love, which has been published by Yale University Press. He is currently teaching a course on Islamic Spirituality, focused on the mystical poetry of Rumi.

End Notes

[1] M.A. Muqtedar Khan, *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

[2] Omid Safi, "Bargaining with Baraka", *Muslim World.*

[3] See for example the works of Jo-Ann Gross, Bruce Lawrence, Vincent Cornell, Carl Ernst, Devin DeWeese, Rob Rozehnal, and others.

[4] For up to date studies of Malcolm X, see Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A life of Reinvention*; Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon.* For an overview of American Islam that centers the experience of African-American Muslims, see Julianne Hammer and Omid Safi, *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam.*

[5] In his new volume, Muqtedar Khan re-centers Islamic governance on "the cosmology of *Ihsan* and the worldview of Al-Tasawwuf, the science of Islamic mysticism." See M.A. Muqtedar Khan, *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan,* 1-2. He has also explicitly called for American Muslims to adopt Ihsan and strive to become a community of Muhsins. M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Live Life as if You have made Eye-Contact with God: Becoming a Virtuous Community," *Islamic Horizon*, (March/April, 2020), pp. 60-61.

[6] https://sunnah.com/bukhari/2/43 in the *Sahih Bukhari,* Kitab al-Iman, #37; https://sunnah.com/muslim/1/7 in the *Sahih Muslim* collection.

[7] Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Fihi Ma Fihi*, Chapter 8.

[8] Cited in Omid Safi, *Radical Love*, 223.

[9] See my conversation with the late Vincent Harding on April 4, 2014, called "Riverside Now", on examining the ramifications of the Freedom Movement for America's encounter with Muslims and Muslim-majority societies.

[10] https://www.facebook.com/NCRMuseum/videos/278256733085966
[Go to 1:16:00]

[11] https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam

[12] James M. Lawson, Jr. "Eve of Non-violent Revolution?"

[13] http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text2/snccstatementofpurpose.pdf

[14] See Omid Safi, *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition*.

[15] See Omid Safi, *Radical Love*, 73-75.

[16] Sa'di, *Golestan*, 590. Translation is from Omid Safi, *Radical Love*, 224.

[17] Cited in Al-Sulami, *Dhikr al-muta'abbidat al-sufiyyat*; Translation is from Omid Safi, *Radical Love*, 250.

[18] Kharaqani, quoted in Omid Safi, *Radical Love*, 244-245.