IHSAN ETHICS AND POLITICAL REVITALIZATION:

Appreciating Muqtedar Khan's *Islam and Good Governance*

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Symposium on Islam and Good Governance

Muqtedar Khan (Ed.)

International Institute of Islamic Thought | October 2020

DOI: 10.47816/01.001.20

Ours is an age of pervasive political turbulence, and the scale of the challenge requires new thinking on politics as well as public ethics for our world. In Western countries, the specter of Islamophobia, alt-right populism, along with racialized violence has shaken public confidence in long-secure assumptions rooted in democracy, diversity, and citizenship. The tragic denouement of so many of the Arab uprisings together with the ascendance of apocalyptic extremists like Daesh and Boko Haram have caused an even greater sense of alarm in large parts of the Muslim-majority world.

It is against this backdrop that M.A. Muqtedar Khan has written a book of breathtaking range and ethical beauty. The author explores the history and sociology of the Muslim world, both classic and contemporary. He does so, however, not merely to chronicle the phases of its development, but to explore just why the message of compassion, mercy, and ethical beauty so prominent in the Quran and Sunna of the Prophet came over time to be displaced by a narrow legalism that emphasized jurisprudence, punishment, and social control. In the modern era, Western Orientalists and Islamists alike have pushed the juridification and interpretive reification of Islamic ethical traditions even further. Each group has asserted that the essence of Islam lies in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and both have tended to imagine this legal heritage on the model of Western positive law, according to which law is authorized, codified, and enforced by a leviathan state. "Reification of *Shariah* and equating of Islam and *Shariah* has a rather emaciating effect on Islam," Khan rightly argues. It leads its proponents to overlook "the depth and heights of Islamic faith, mysticism, philosophy or even emotions such as divine love (*Muhabba*)" (13). As the sociologist of Islamic law, Sami Zubaida, has similarly observed, in all these developments one sees evidence, not of a traditionalist reassertion of Muslim values, but a "triumph of Western models" of religion and state (Zubaida 2003:135).

To counteract these impoverishing trends, Khan presents a far-reaching analysis that "seeks to move away from the now failed vision of Islamic states without demanding

radical secularization" (2). He does so by positioning himself squarely within the ethical and mystical legacy of the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet. As the book's title makes clear, the key to this effort of religious recovery is "the cosmology of *Ihsan* and the worldview of *Al-Tasawwuf*, the science of Islamic mysticism" (1-2).

For Islamist activists whose models of Islam have more to do with contemporary identity politics than a deep reading of Islamic traditions, Khan's foregrounding of *Ihsan* may seem unfamiliar or baffling. But one of the many achievements of this book is the skill with which it plumbs the depth of scripture, classical commentaries, and *tasawwuf* practices to recover and confirm the ethic that lies at their heart. "The Quran promises that God is with those who do beautiful things," the author reminds us (Khan 2019:1). The concept of *Ihsan* appears 191 times in 175 verses in the Quran (110). The concept is given its richest elaboration, Khan explains, in the famous hadith of the Angel Gabriel. This tradition recounts that when Gabriel appeared before the Prophet he asked, "What is *Ihsan*?" Both Gabriel's question and the Prophet's response make clear that *Ihsan* is an ideal at the center of the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet, and that it enjoins "perfection, goodness, to better, to do beautiful things and to do righteous deeds" (3). It is this cosmological ethic that Khan argues must be restored and implemented "to develop a political philosophy … that emphasizes love over law" (2).

In its expansive exploration of Islamic ethics and civilization, Khan's *Islam and Good Governance* will remind some readers of the late Shahab Ahmed's remarkable book, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Ahmed 2016). Both are works of impressive range and spiritual depth. But whereas Ahmed stood in the humanities wing of Islamic studies, Khan is an intellectual polymath who moves easily across the Islamic sciences, social theory, and comparative politics. He brings the full weight of his effort to conclusion with policy recommendations for how "to combine Sufism with political theory" (6), and to do so in a way that recommends specific "Islamic principles that encourage good governance, and *politics in pursuit of goodness*" (8).

These latter recommendations are decisive, but inevitably they will

elicit varied responses. In Chapter 4, Khan provides a vivid account of his travels to five Muslim-majority countries in the early stages of writing his book, not long after he realized "that the idea of *Ihsan* was the key to the enlightened understanding of Islam that I sought" (98). He reports that, in the course of his travels, Muslim scholars in the academy "were fascinated by the idea of developing a political philosophy based on *Ihsan*" (ibid.). Yet the response in other circles was often skeptical. Muslims of Salafi and Islamist persuasion were hostile toward any ethical proposal seen as grounded in Sufi traditions. Surprisingly, even "Sufi-leaning scholars" were unenthusiastic about his proposal, because for these believers "the purpose of *Ihsan* in life is to detach oneself from the seductions of this world, power and wealth, and not to find fulfillment in them" (99).

To his credit, Khan brings these skeptical responses into his narrative and recognizes the challenge they represent. Having done research for more than three decades in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, I am confident that in some Muslim-majority lands, especially those with still vibrant traditions of *tasawwuf*, the *Ihsan* alternative may yet receive an enthusiastic hearing. Over the past five years, the sixty-million member Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Muslim social welfare association, has launched a series of national and international initiatives on "humanitarian Islam," all designed to counter the narrow-minded and reifying legalism of the country's small but assertive network of transnational Islamists. Although not explicitly referencing *Ihsan,* NU has not been the least bit shy about announcing its conviction that democracy and inclusive citizenship are deeply compatible with Islamic values in general as well as the Muslim world's traditions of divine love and mysticism in particular.[1]

In broad swaths of the Muslim-majority world, and even in modernist Muslim circles in Indonesia, however, the response to proposals that suggest *Ihsan* should be the basis of a more compassionate Muslim governance may well resemble what Khan encountered in his travels. In one passage in his book, as he assesses what is required to elevate governance around the Muslim world, Khan observes, "It will take a global movement to transform the idea of religiosity as service to humanity.

Nothing less than a revival and reform of Sufism can accomplish this challenging task" (144). Although, again, in many Muslim lands Sufism and neo-Sufism are flourishing, my sense is that the "agonistic pluralism" (to use Chantal Mouffe's phrase, referring to the inevitable and vitally necessary clash of public ethical principles that takes place in all modern societies) so characteristic of Western politics and modernity has also become a key feature of politics and ethics in Muslim countries. On this feature of global modernity, I suspect there is no going back. So, however beautiful the vision (and I agree it is), to pin one's hopes for good governance on a global Sufi revival may mean the chances of success are slim indeed.

My reading of Khan's proposal, however, leads me to conclude that there may yet be a more immediate and accessible pathway toward the realization of his proposal, one that preserves most of the substance of the *Ihsan* ethic while utilizing different social processes already underway in Muslim societies. What I am referring to here are an array of educational, economic, and political changes already sweeping large sections of the Muslim world, and creating great social pressures for a rethinking of Islamic public ethics on terms not dissimilar to those Khan has in mind, but understood as a reconstitution of shariah ethics rather than a Sufi revival as such. My sense is that building on this already-existing aspiration for shariah reform can achieve many of the same goals of Khan's *Ihsan* proposal, but with a greater degree of sociological feasibility by harnessing existing social and ethical trends.

As Khan himself shows so well, the crises of authority and religious ethics shaping much of the world have led conservative Islamists to imagine that God's law is unitary and unchanging, so much so that a true Islamic ethics can do no more than implement that law in a fixed, inflexible, and thus highly ineffectual way. Where such an unreformed and (ironically) Western positivist understanding of shariah commands public support, there may well be few grounds for ethical reform on the scale intended by Khan and others calling for Islamic renewal (*tajdid*) for the purposes of enhanced equity, compassion, and justice. Recent years have seen a growing array of efforts to break out of this ethical and epistemological impasse, however, as

seen in proposals made by Muslim intellectuals of varied pedigree, including Ebrahim Moosa, Muhammad Hashim Kamali, Tariq Ramadan, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and Jasser Auda, among many others. In his *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (2009), Tariq Ramadan, for instance, provides one of the most concise syntheses of this reformed-shariah-ethics approach, and I cite it here because, in my view, he clearly articulates the epistemological obstacles involved in any such effort.[2]

Ramadan observes that an Islamic ethics capable of meeting the challenges of the modern age will be impossible without the cooperation as equals of *ulama an-nusus* ("text scholars") with *ulama al-waqi'* ("context scholars"). In Ramadan's model, the *ulama al-waqi* are primarily scholars working in the natural and social sciences. They are as important as scholars of the Islamic sciences, he explains, because "the world, its laws, and areas of specialized knowledge not only shed light on scriptural sources but also constitute a source of law on their own" (Ramadan 2009: 83). In Ramadan's view, then, an ethical life consistent with shariah is not merely a matter of conformity to a fixed and finished body of legal rules (*ahkam*). The struggle for the good also requires that believers grasp the higher aims of the law (*maqasid al-shari`a*) and then go one step further: develop the empirical knowledge of society and nature required to solve ethical problems in an empirically effective manner consistent with the full truth of revelation.

What is so timely and important about these *maqasid*-based proposals for ethical reorientation is that they link aspirations for Islamic ethical reform to far-reaching sociological and epistemological changes already underway in Muslim societies. I find this suggestion quite persuasive, but I do think that we also need to talk about the move from Sufism to *Maqasid* (or *Maqasid* to Sufism). One way would be to highlight the *Maqasid* as protecting life, honor, family, and property, linking together the sanctity of life and honor as goals of the Sufi approach to humanity as well.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of new institutions of health care, education, science, and social welfare provision across the entire Muslim world. The knowledge required to progress in such fields represented an

effective refutation of the claim that proper Islamic ethics involves no more than conformity to fixed and finished rules, without any of the epistemological expansion both Ramadan and Khan propose. Advances in education, science, and health care also offered a real-world counter-point to the unempirical claims that an essentialized version of Islamic law is a panacea for all social ills which does not require a sustained engagement with the sciences of the world or with the higher aims of God's law. Of course, some people may insist that the new forms of knowledge required for such an ethical reformulation are "secular," not Islamic. But others with a deeper religious understanding will recognize that this "knowledge of the world" is an additional means of moving closer to God.

There is another sociological reality contributing to these new Islamic understandings of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The creation of modern Islamic hospitals, banks, laboratories, and universities – which is to say, sites where Muslim actors are obliged to put new forms of knowledge and ethical action into daily practice – allows believers with new and important life-world skills to acquire a social standing and influence in Muslim communities that exceeds that of activists committed to a reified and positivist understanding of Islamic law. These and other "mundane" activities have served to convince a growing number of Muslims that the moral and spiritual challenges of the age require more complex ethical engagements than conformity to unchanging rules, or to the religious authorities who claim an exclusive right to voice their truth. Momentum for this global process of Muslim ethical and epistemological reform is already strong. For those with an understanding of the beauty of *Ihsan,* the same process of *maqasid*-based ethical reformulation can provide a vehicle for promoting an even deeper realization, "that God loves those who do beautiful things" (Quran 2:195). Indeed, with growing public awareness, this simple truth will provide powerful support for good governance and a truly Islamic way of life.

Robert W. Hefner is a professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Pardee School of Global Affairs at Boston University. From 1986-2017, he worked with the sociologist Peter L. Berger and served as director and/or associate director of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs (CURA) at Boston University. Hefner is a social theorist who specializes in the anthropology of religion, ethics and law (including shariah law), education and youth development, as well as the comparative study of gender, citizenship, globalization, and modernity. He has directed some 24 major research projects and organized 19 international conferences, on issues ranging from Muslim politics and shariah law to citizenship and civic education in Western democratic societies. His research in recent years has had two thematic and areal foci: the politics and ethics of pluralist co-existence in the Muslim-majority world, including especially Indonesia and Malaysia; and, second, social recognition and citizenship among Catholics, Muslims, and secular-liberals in France and the United States. Hefner has published 21 edited or single-authored books, as well as seven major policy reports for the U.S. government and private foundations. Seven of his books have been translated into Indonesian and Malay; one has been published in Chinese. With the support of the Henry Luce Foundation, Hefner is currently (2019-2021) co-producing (with Zainal Abidin Bagir of Gadjah Mada University) six films on plurality, gender, and citizenship in Indonesia. He is also completing a book on Muslims, shariah law, and the quest for a modern Muslim ethics.

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END NOTES

[1] See https://baytarrahmah.org/humanitarian-islam/).

[2] Ramadan is currently under indictment in France on charges of sexual assault. Although he has publicly acknowledged marital infidelities, the court case against him has yet to be resolved.