

M. A. Muqtedar Khan. *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. xxi+278 pages.

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M. A. Muqtedar Khan, who is widely known for his earlier edited work *Islamic Democratic Discourse* and his article *What is Enlightenment? An Islamic Perspective*, presents this time a monograph which is focused on a single task. The argument of the book is carefully structured to invite the reader to reflect upon a long-lasting problem. Moreover, it not only analyzes the problem thoroughly but also offers a solution to it by doing justice to both historical and conceptual aspects of the problem.

The author intends to propose an alternative paradigm for Muslims in overcoming their ongoing troubles regarding international security, conflict resolution, foreign policy, interfaith relations and social reform and development, and nation-building. Khan argues that instead of focusing on a structural level by demanding a Shariah-based state, Muslims can find ways to deal with social and political issues by invoking the principle of *Ihsan*, which has been traditionally understood as having a personal rather than communal connotation. Khan seeks to apply *Ihsan* in a communal setting to show that it promises a way out of a split worldview which consists in “two worlds, the real one where they have to deal with the world of nation-states and existing laws and then the imaginary one wherein they talk about Islamic identity, the Muslim world and Islamic things that exist as ideals or existed in an idealized memory of the past.” (p. 249) He advises Muslims that if they bring these two worlds together by implementing the *Ihsan* principle in the public sphere, then the Islamist threat would be destined to end.

After the introductory chapter, Khan goes on in chapter 2 to demonstrate that the principle of *Ihsan* could not find a place in the development of Islamic law after the prophet. Chapter 3 is intended to survey Muslim approaches to modernity and lists Modernists, Islamists, Traditionalists as major camps, among which he explicitly favors the Modernist approach.

In chapter 4, Khan lays out a historical and conceptual analysis of the concept of Ihsan particularly in the context of the Sufi understanding of self-education by contemplating one's actions in the light of the awareness that God always watches you. Based on this analysis, in chapter 5, Khan proposes that Ihsan does not have to be reduced to individual awareness. Instead, he argues, Ihsan should be applied to politics and society. He reserves chapter 6 for outlining the historical background of Islamic political philosophy from the Rightly Guided Caliphs to the Arab Spring which overemphasizes the significance of Shariah and the lawful social structure that is assumed to follow from it. Finally, in chapter 7, Khan delineates the principle of Ihsan in the spheres of state regulations and social change. Khan prescribes that by holding to Ihsan Muslims "emphasize love over law, process (Islamic governance) over structure (Islamic state) and self-annihilation (Fanaa) over identity or self-assertion." (p. 3)

The clarity of Khan's proposal is impressive, considered an especially wide array of fields he is trying to cover. His historical criticisms, as well as conceptual analyses, demonstrate a great deal of research done not only in front of a desk but also in the field. His efforts to encompass as many approaches to Ihsan as possible cannot be overlooked. Yet, the book does not lose track of its task from beginning to end. It is quite exciting to have such scholarly accomplishments in the Islamic studies field.

And yet, *Islam and Good Governance* comes with a major drawback. When analyzing the historical development of Ihsan, Khan departs from reality but lands in an unrealistic political optimism. Khan's suggestion that *the Shariah* should not be taken at the structural level but in a process of change, he deliberately dismisses the problems posed by political philosophy. His proposal to turn to love from law draws an imaginary line between laws to morality. He assumes that a neutral state would not take sides in an argument concerning public matters. However, he dismisses the problems of political philosophy that are specifically related to being a modern state. These problems such as power struggles, conflict of interests, legitimacy, the struggle between social classes do not stem from a demand for an Islamic government. What are the limits of individual freedoms in a society? What is the best way to prevent violence? Answering these questions requires the state authority to take sides in line with what is lawful. Otherwise, it will be totally up to a small elite that could manipulate the public towards their ends. Khan suggests that *shura* will take care of these issues, but the point he misses is that *shura* presupposes legal uniformity and authority. What would legitimize an authority in the first place to enable *shura*? What could be the common ground that there has to be a resolution? The author assumes that this common ground can be

provided by moral principles like Ihsan, but this is simply not realistic. His one-size-fit-for-all approach does not differ from unrealistic proposals of Islamist theoreticians in terms of dealing with the real issues like violence and segregation. Khan's unrealism is apparent most in his rhetorical question that "how can one bear witness to God and act as if he is seeing us and we are seeing him when one wears a suicide vest and walks into a school or a mosque or shoots a young girl in the face?" (p. 249). I think an ISIS suicide bomber is more than anything motivated by the feeling that God witnesses his actions. His or her idea that there should be an Islamic State is just a means to an end. Since this end is metaphysical rather than merely political, the suicide bomber would find no reason to consider Khan's suggestion that Muslims should focus on governance instead of the government. This is true even when we assume that Khan's unrealistic ideal of "an intimidationfree society where people fear not the law but fear their own demons" (p. 247) is realized.

Islam and Good Governance proves to be another attempt in a larger scholarship of eliminating the so-called Islamist threat. As it shares a general trait with the rest of the scholarship that it is Muslims' responsibility to reassure the world that Islam and Muslims are not monsters (p. 247). It also joins them in failing to address the problem from a metaphysical point of view, rather than purely secular. It is a failure because this literature is to satisfy the demands of modernity more than the demands of a Muslim who simply seeks God's approval at all costs. Even though Khan's research is valuable for its remarkable contribution to the literature particularly for its historical and conceptual survey, it is difficult to conclude that it succeeds in proposing a realistic solution to what he sees as the problem of reducing "Islam from being a fount of civilization, ethics, values, norms, cultures, and politics to essentially a political identity." (pp. 6-7)