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This book attempts to develop an Islamic political philosophy of good governance grounded on Ihsan. The author defines Ihsan as a spiritual state that emphasizes love over law, ethics over politics, compassion over retribution, other-caring or self-annihilation (Fanaa) over identity or self-assertion and process (Islamic governance) over structure (Islamic state). He claims that this is the highest, most beautiful, most compassionate state and “an enlightened understanding of Islam,” where the enlightenment is that of Kant (97). The argument is developed in three stages. Initially, in Chapters 2 and 3, he makes the case, in a very Orientalist and apologetic way, for the writing of the book by demonstrating that Muslims have lost Ihsan. After introducing Ihsan in Chapters 4 and 5, he focuses on political philosophy in Chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 2 aims to show the systematic exclusion of Ihsan in the development and application of Islamic law by presenting two cases. The first is about breaking one’s fast during Ramadan through having sexual intercourse with one’s spouse. Khan argues that the Prophetic practice that jurists refer to ends with forgiveness and even with charity shown to the man who breaks his fast. But “[e]very jurist” (20) only provides the first part, where the Prophet listed the compensations, and ignores the last part. The second case is about blasphemy against the Prophet. And, he claims that blasphemy laws and Muslim reactions to blasphemy are “completely un-Islamic” (26). His main example is the Asia Bibi case in which she, a Christian woman in Pakistan, is accused of insulting the Prophet, with a huge controversy arising as a consequence of this.

Chapter 3 is about Muslim responses to modernity in relation to Islamic revivalism. Khan identifies four such responses: those of traditionalists, modernists, Islamists and secularists. The first three are “Islamic responses” (52) since Islam is central to their projects in one way or another. Among them, Khan champions modernists as they have “sought to demonstrate that Islam is not incompatible with science, modernity, democracy and human rights” and “are primarily concerned with the loss of the principal belief that Islam is a progressive religion” (49), while both traditionalists and Islamists miss the point and the realities of the world. However, he argues that despite the “excellent pathways” (59) prescribed by modernists, unfortunately, Islamists have had the most impact on contemporary Muslims. Hence, Khan holds Islamists responsible for the problems of Muslims; and their cardinal sin, he argues, is the reduction of Islam to a (political) identity...
and ideology. Additionally, for him, common Muslims’ ignorance and inability to understand modernists are important factors both in the ascendancy of Islamists and then the problems (60).

Chapter 4 is a review of the understanding of Ihsan in the literature. After the Qur’an and Hadith, he discusses some names like Abu Haneefah, Ibn Taymiyyah, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, Rumi and four contemporary scholars “from the East and the West” (89). From the West he discusses Sheikh Hisham Kabbani and Professor William Chittick. From “the Muslim world” (89), interestingly, he replaces “the East” with “the Muslim world” and excludes the Muslim(s) in the West from it, and he examines the works of Sheikh Muhammad bin Hassan and Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine. The Western World section starts with a statement consistent with his apologetic Orientalism: “today many practicing Muslims and Muslim mystics are indebted to Western academy for helping them connect and remain engaged with their tradition” (94). After reviewing Western scholars, the chapter ends with a discussion of contemporary attitudes and insights on Ihsan where the author basically tells us about his engagement with Muslims who have mostly disappointed him because of their ignorance about Ihsan. In Chapter 5, where he begins with the Hadith of Gabriel on which he builds his theory, Khan presents his own understanding of Ihsan by figuring out some specific aspects of it such as love, witnessing God, political forgiveness and mercy, the pursuit of excellence, beauty, complete submission, and epistemology. Through these aspects, he seeks to construct a worldview on Ihsan.

Chapter 6 is a review of Islamic political philosophy from the first four Caliphs to the Arab Spring. He briefly discusses Al-Farabi, Al-Mawardi, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Khaldun, Syed Qutb, Maududi, Khomeini, Al-Nabbehani and some Sufis. He claims that while there are some elements of diversity in the pre-modern era thanks to names such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Khaldun, this is not the case now. The postcolonial era is “a tragedy” (208), seen as being dominated by the juristic-theologian perspective of scholars like Al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah. In this era, he identifies four approaches: Westernization/secularization by Westernized secular elites, the demand for the Caliphate, the quest for the Islamic State and the modernist vision of Islamic Democracy. Except for the last one which he advocates and develops in the last part of the chapter, Khan criticizes all three using the same arguments as in Chapters 2 and 3.

After demonstrating the absence of a political philosophy based on Ihsan in Chapter 6, he attempts to develop one in Chapter 7. He starts with the state-ruler and society-ruled division. Then he cites five Ihsan-based principles for each. For the state: the principle of Tawheed as sovereignty, shifting example from righteous caliphs to prophet; shifting focus from structure to process, which means from government to governance; shifting emphasis from national interest to national
virtue; and seeking justice as a social condition. For a societal change, the principles are derived from the aspects of Ihsan in Chapter 5: citizens as witnesses meaning a critical society, citizens as character builders, citizens as lawmakers, citizenship as self-regulation and citizens as rulers which means good governance, “God-centric” (244), as opposed to God-governance.

For someone who wants to learn the literature on Ihsan and Islamic political thought in relation to it, Khan’s work can serve as a good reference book. Particularly worth noting is that, considering that he studies Ihsan from and in terms of different perspectives or disciplines, what he has achieved is a very difficult task. Moreover, beyond presenting the literature succinctly, he critically engages with many of those works in detail despite the limited space of the book. However, this critical engagement and the book, in general, suffer from contradictions and inconsistencies to the extent that they can refute the very fundamental argument of the book. For example, one of the main criticisms levelled at Islamist political thought is that the “system of Caliphate has no appeal to those who are not Muslims” because of the problem of how one can persuade non-Muslims that the best head of state can only come from an Arab tribe (218). Putting aside his reductionist and essentialist reading of the Caliphate system, it is not clear how a system based on Ihsan which he mainly derives from Quran and Hadith and calls a “God-centric” governance can appeal to non-Muslims, particularly atheists. Another inconsistency appears about Islamists. We do not know who is an Islamist and who is not, and whether they have failed or succeeded. For example, at one point he claims that “Wherever Islamists have come to power, they have failed in their efforts to bring order, peace and justice; on the contrary, they have ushered in authoritarianism and divisions within Muslim communities and between Muslims and non-Muslims” (164). However, in many other places the AK Party case in Turkey up till the past several years is mentioned as a story of success. Furthermore, whether the AK Party is Islamist or not is also something about which Khan changes his mind several times. He also contradicts himself about Muslim agency. He states that “Without agency, there is no sovereignty and, without sovereignty, there is no polity. It is time Muslims recognized that God has granted them agency to act and [so] must act to bear witness to Him in the political sense” (215). On the other hand, he denies this very agency to Muslims, especially Islamists, when they decline to follow his own Orientalist path. Otherwise, how can one claim that the demand for an Islamic state is not a demand for sovereignty or a polity? Considering his criticism of Islamic identity, what he says about agency becomes much more complicated.

Another problem of the book is that of the Orientalist double standards. Khan prefers to be blind to the sufferings and good actions of Muslims and writes almost exclusively about what he sees in them that he considers bad, while the
opposite applies to the West. While some examples of failure or violence from the Islamic states are considered enough to declare that all are the same, this is not the case for the Western democracies. When trying to prove how non-compassionate Muslims are, by generalizing two cases he condemns the whole of the Muslim world. But we do not see the same generalization when it comes to charities, international aid or the fact that millions of refugees are hosted by Muslim countries while being denied entry and deported by the West. Indeed, worse than non-generalization, there is no mention of such examples. Khan himself seems to withhold from Muslims the very compassion and love he accuses them of not showing, and which he recommends they should practice.

For the problems that many Muslims are enduring, only Muslims are held responsible—with hardly any reference to the conditions and history they have experienced. There is no mention of colonialism, no mention of invasions or sanctions, and no mention of wars such as in Afghanistan and Iraq in the past or in Yemen and Syria now, almost all of which are somehow supported, enabled or waged by the West. Even in the very rare paragraphs where he touches upon such things, he ends up blaming Muslims. For example, talking about the actions of “Jihadi groups such as Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and Islamic State (Daesh),” he justifies the actions of the West: “They also invite the Western powers to attack these countries by committing acts of terrorism in the West. . . . In addition, they have incited a discourse of Islamophobia that makes the lives of ordinary Muslims in a globalized world very difficult” (200). And, since Muslims are the most responsible for Islamophobia and invasions, it is also incumbent on them to resolve such problems: “In this age when Islamophobia is rampant, it is important for Muslims to actualize this divine promise so that rather than fearing Islam and Muslims, the world is reassured that Islam and Muslims are here to bring love, compassion and comfort to others. Muslims in the State of Ihsan can be nothing but mercy to all of humanity” (247).

In this sense, by claiming that everything will be fine if Muslims become good and moderate as all bad things are so because of people’s badness and extremism, Khan reproduces the good Muslim—bad Muslim dichotomy, too. Yet, unfortunately, Khan does not utter a single word about how a Palestinian or a Rohingya or a Kashmiri can “bring love, compassion and comfort to others” while being refused even the very basic right to life. His solution is that “rather than seeking power, advocates of Islam should seek to bring Ihsan into society. . . . Muslims should focus on process, make it inclusionary and one that privileges the various dimensions of Islam and through criticism and activism keeps the social conscience alive” (8). Thus, Khan believes in a world without power where a liberal-individualist reading of Islam is the solution. However, in his liberal utopia without power, Khan misses the point that to be able to realize all
these recommendations and institute his “State of Ihsan,” one initially needs that state which means power, security, safe space, etc. Besides, we do not know why power and Ihsan are necessarily mutually exclusive.

Apart from those, the book has also some scholarly problems. Many things are taken for granted both ideologically—such as democracy, pluralism, enlightenment—and empirically/historically. For instance, when the author mentions pre-modern society and Sufism (159) or claims that Turkish Islamism is different on account of its Sufi background (194), he fails to provide any sources. This is the same for his generalizations which are mainly based on his personal experiences and opinions. He is very confident when saying “all Muslims” or “every Muslim jurist,” providing hardly any source except for those personal experiences. Ironically, too, not merely those experiences but also his main references are taken only from a couple of countries from South Asia and the Middle East in addition to the West. While trying to save Islam from Muslims, Khan seems to create his own imagined community of Muslims in order to establish his utopian state referred to in the book.