

Muqtedar Khan's Feelgood Religious Narrative

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In the days, months and years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Professor Muqtedar Khan of the University of Delaware found himself grappling with an unrelenting question of faith and identity: “If al-Qaeda, ISIS, and all the human rights violations committed in the name of Islam are not my faith,” he would ask himself, “then what is?”

His answer, [we learned last week](#), came in the form of a book:

The University of Delaware professor of international relations calls his most recent book, Islam and Good Governance, “my much-delayed response.”

“Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan” was published in April 2019.

*Simultaneously an endorsement of religious and political freedom and an academic reinterpretation of the Quran, **the***

book seeks to reclaim the beauty, mysticism and virtues of Islamic teaching through a concept Khan said he believes, "Muslims have not yet understood – or simply ignored."

Where in his book does Khan endorse "religious and political freedom"? Does he believe that Muslims who apostatize should not be punished? Does he think that Muslims should not be proselytizing among the Unbelievers? Does he really think that Islam endorses religious freedom, given that historically, in Muslim-dominated lands, non-Muslims were allowed to remain alive to practice their faith only if they accepted the onerous conditions of the *dhimmi* status? As for political freedom, what does Muqtedar Khan mean by that? Does he oppose, for example, the ruling families who reign in the Arab Gulf, in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain? In what Muslim country has Western-style democracy ever taken root? Or does Muqtedar Khan not wish to be confronted with too much reality?

That concept is Ihsan, taken from the Quran passage that says, "God is with those who do beautiful deeds." In Islamic tradition, it also lives in the words of the prophet Muhammad, who was asked by the angel Gabriel to define Ihsan: "To Worship Allah as if you see him; and if you can't see Him, know that He sees you."

Rethinking the Muslim religion through this lens will require a fundamental philosophy shift, Khan said. Ihsan goes against how many economies and institutions have evolved over centuries. It stands in opposition to how the Muslim world is perceived and understood.

"An Islamic State is currently one where Islamic Law is enforced – and these are laws that come from the medieval understanding of Islam. Until we change that, we will never have good governance," he said. "It is unfair of Muslims to demand non-Muslims bypass realities like ISIS and al-Qaeda

and discover true Islam. Muslims must manifest what it is. The Prophet has said three times that you're not a Muslim if your neighbor is afraid of you."

On what basis does Muqtedar Khan claim that the Islamic Law – Sharia – derives from what he describes as a “medieval understanding of Islam”? There is no “medieval understanding” of Sharia; there is only the understanding that has lasted for 1,400 years, that has not varied over time. The ability or desire of Muslims to impose the rules of Sharia may vary, depending on their circumstances, but the contents of the Sharia itself do not vary.

While Muqtedar Khan insists that Muslims not try to convince non-Muslims to ignore (“bypass realities”) ISIS and al-Qaeda, he nonetheless suggests that both groups distort the “true Islam.” He refuses to admit that the members of such groups differ from other Muslims only in the degree to which they take to heart, and are willing to act upon, the Qur’anic commands to “fight,” to “kill,” to “smite at the necks of,” and to “strike terror in the hearts of” the Unbelievers. He then claims that Muslims must “manifest” what the real Islam is – the reason for his book – **a faith that he insists is peaceful and non-threatening. He quotes the Prophet as saying three times that “you’re not a Muslim if your neighbor is afraid of you.”** But in what Hadith, of what authority, is Muhammad quoted as saying this? It is in the collection of Bukhari, that most authoritative of Hadith scholars, that one finds Muhammad claiming “I have been made victorious through terror.” Was Muhammad not intent on making his non-Muslim neighbors “afraid”?

But Ihsan could help reframe a global and collective understanding of Islam. Khan said, “The word ‘worship’ in Arabic literally means, ‘to serve.’ The service of humanity is the purpose of Islam.”

The purpose of Islam is not to “serve humanity” indiscriminately, but to spread the faith until Islam everywhere dominates, and Muslims rule, everywhere. Of course Muqtedar Khan may be thinking to himself that the best way to “serve humanity” is to ensure that everyone convert to Islam, the True Path. It’s unclear what he really believes about his faith, and what is merely taqiyya designed to protect and promote the faith. He has to ignore so much of what is in the Qur’an and the Hadith to make such a claim as “the service of humanity is the purpose of Islam” that deliberate taqiyya, and not mere mental confusion, most likely explains his claims.

*His book has already attracted wide interest, from Mennonite Christians to fellow Muslims. **The American Federation of Muslims of Indian Origins plans to recognize the publication for “excellence in scholarship and interfaith outreach” – an honor that speaks to his very goal.***

His book does not display “excellence in scholarship,” given how much of the Qur’an he deliberately overlooks, but certainly it shows a deep interest in “interfaith outreach.”

*“Muslims could carve a niche for themselves as the minority that cares, serves and loves everyone,” Khan writes in **Islam and Good Governance**. “Muslim states and societies can advocate a culture of volunteerism. There are volunteer movements in the Muslim world whose explicit goal is to gain closeness to God by service to humanity. What we need to do is globalize them, make service as valued and desirable as is worship, and make Muslims take pride in service as they do in their ritual devotions, especially in the month of Ramadan. It will require a sea change in attitudes, but the pursuit of Ihsan demands nothing less.”*

Should one laugh, or cry, at Khan’s suggestion that Muslims, after 1,400 years of Jihad carried out against the Infidels, can now “carve a niche for themselves as the minority that

cares, serves and loves everyone"? In what place, in what time, have Muslims ever showed themselves ready to "care, serve, and love everyone"? They are not even permitted to make non-Muslims the object of their charitable giving, Zakat. Seventeen times a day, in saying their five canonical prayers, they curse the Kuffar – the Christians and the Jews. Will Khan's book convince Yusuf al-Qaradawi or the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed El-Tayeb, or any other Muslim cleric, that Muslims must no longer distinguish between Believers and Unbelievers, but should care, serve, and love everyone equally? Isn't Muqtedar Khan's book really aimed at non-Muslims, one more example of that deeply dishonest interfaith outreach that has been such a feature of Muslim writing since 9/11?

First published in