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Surah Al-Nisā': Some Lessons for Muslim Business Leaders Based on the Works of Khaled and Khan

Surah Al-Nisā': Beberapa pelajaran untuk Pemimpin Perniagaan Muslim berdasarkan Tafsiran Khaled dan Khan

Rodrigue Fontaine*

Abstract

This study looks at su-rah al-Nisā' (Chapter The Women) and draws some lessons for Muslim business leaders. The focus is on Muslim business leaders as they have the power and authority to transform the corporate culture of their organisations. The author compared and contrasted the works of Khaled and Khan. Although the general theme of the su-rah is justice, this author focuses on *ihsān*. Generally, people need to have *ihsān* towards one another (4:36), whether Muslims or non-Muslims. Extrapolating from this principle, this su-rah teaches us that managers need to have *ihsān* towards their subordinates and vice-versa. The complexity of the concept of *ihsān* is explored. Although *ihsān* is linked to *taqwa* (piety), it is also linked to remembering death and resurrection. The author tried two experiments, derived from the work of Kübler-Ross, to demonstrate how developing a culture of *ihsān* is possible. The findings state that developing a culture of *ihsān* is straightforward but facilitators need to have a counselling background to address participants' concerns in the right manner.

Keywords: Qur'an, ihsan, corporate culture, counselling, Islamic leadership.

Abstrak

Kajian ini tentang sūrah an-Nisa bagi mengambil beberapa pengajaran untuk pemimpin perniaga Islam. Tumpuannya khusus pemimpin perniaga Islam kerana mereka mempunyai kuasa dan autoriti untuk mengubah budaya korporat organisasi mereka. Penulis membandingkan dan membezakan karya-karya Khaled dan Khan. Walaupun

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Surah Al-Nisā': Some Lessons for Muslim Business Leaders Based on the 316
Works of Khaled and Khan

tema umum sūrah ini adalah keadilan tetapi penulis memberi tumpuan tentang konsep ihsan. Secara umum, setiap orang perlu mempunyai ihsan terhadap satu sama lain (4:36), sama ada orang Islam atau bukan Islam. Pengkaitan daripada prinsip tersebut, sūrah ini mengajar kita bahawa pengurus perlu mempunyai ihsan kepada orang bawahan mereka dan sebaliknya. Konsep ihsan yang menyeluruh dan berhubung kait juga diteroka. Walaupun ihsan dikaitkan dengan taqwa (taqwa), ia juga dikaitkan dengan mengingati kematian dan kebangkitan. Penulis melakukan dua eksperimen, yang berasal dari karya Kübler-Ross, untuk menunjukkan keupayaan membangunkan budaya ihsan. Kesimpulannya ialah membina budaya ihsan adalah mudah tetapi memerlukan fasilitator yang mempunyai latar belakang kaunseling untuk menangani masalah peserta dengan cara yang berkesan.

Kata Kunci: Al-Qur'an, ihsan, budaya korporat, kaunseling, kepimpinan Islam.

Introduction

This author is interested in Islamic management. He proposes that Islamic management solves the following problem: “*Can we develop organisations that allow individuals to fulfil their purpose of creation?*” At this moment, most commercial organisations are focusing on making as much profit as possible. This is often done in a manner that contradicts Islam’s moral principles. The author has started a project to identify lessons in the Qur’an for Muslim employees by taking each *sūrah* as a unit of analysis. This study focuses on extracting some lessons from *sūrah Al-Nisa’* for Muslim employees in general and Muslim business leaders in particular. Indeed, Muslim business leaders are the only ones with the power and authority to change the corporate culture in their respective organisations.

Over the last 1,400 years, many great scholars have explained the meaning of *sūrah Al-Nisa’*. Among them include scholars like Ibn ‘Abbas, Ibn Mas‘ud, Anas ibn Mālik, Al-Tabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī, and al-Suyūtī among many others¹. These scholars tend to follow the same methodology: that is explaining the Qur’an by the Qur’an, followed by quoting relevant narrations and then relying on the rules of Arabic grammar. In English, one of the most well-known *tafsir* is the English translation of Ibn Kathir by al-Mubarakpuri.² In the 20th century,

¹ See Philips B, *Uṣūl at-Tafsīr: The Methodology of Qur’ānic Explanation*, (Kuala Lumpur: AS Nordeen, 2000), pp. 15-25.

² S.R. Al-Mubārakpūrī, *Tafsīr Ibn Kahtir*, Abridged, vol 10, (Riyād, KSA: Dārru Salām, 2013).

new developments include the focus on the coherence of the Qur'an (*nazm*) based on the works of Farāhi and 'Iṣlāhi.³ Although these *tafsirs* are very beneficial, there seems to be a need for shorter articles that identify issues that are pertinent to Muslim business leaders in the 21st century. These articles can then be given to undergraduate and postgraduate students as part of the required reading for their management courses. These shorter articles can be also distributed through social media to benefit business leaders that want something that is relevant to them, has academic integrity, and is short enough to fit in with their busy schedule.

Methodology

This research is based on the *tawhidic* paradigm, which assumes that the social sciences should be aligned with the Qur'an and the Sunnah. This methodology has been chosen because of the limitations of existing methodologies used in management research. Many management concepts are not wrong but they have to be understood in the bigger context, namely that human beings have been created to worship Allah (51:56). A detailed analysis of this *sūrah* is not possible due to its length and its richness. This is a limitation to this study. The short explanations of Amr Khaled and Nouman Ali Khan will be analysed by referring to Khaled⁴ and Khan⁵ respectively. Both are activists and preachers. Khaled is influential in the Arab world and Khan is influential in the United States and around the world. Both speak in a manner that often inspires Muslim business leaders. Neither claim to be scholars of *tafsir* but both summarise and popularise the works of other scholars. The benefit of presenting two perspectives on the same *sūrah* is that it develops the critical thinking skills of business students and business leaders.

Khaled

Khaled notes that this is a *Madani sūrah* with 176 *āyat*. It calls for justice and mercy to all, especially for vulnerable and weak people. The focus includes orphans, slaves, servants, heirs, women and non-

³ For a clear and concise review of these two modern scholars, see M. Mir, *Thematic and Structural Coherence in the Qur'ān: A Study of 'Iṣlāhī's Concept of "Nazm"*. (PhD, University of Michigan, UMI Dissertations, 1983).

⁴ Khāled, *Qur'ānic Reflections: Insights into the objectives of the Qur'ānic verses*. (Cairo: AmrKhaled.Net, n.d).

⁵ N.A. Khan, "Surah an-Nisā", *Cover to Cover*. www.bayyinah.tv., 2012.

Muslims who live in Muslim lands. The title of the *suṭrah* indicates that justice starts with the good treatment of women.

Allah starts with a universal appeal to have piety (*taqwa*) as it is a pre-condition to justice. The subject matter shifts to the property of the orphans (4:02), the dowry of women (4:04) and inheritance (4:08 to 4:12). The common thread is that injustice often occurs because of issues related to wealth. Allah reminds people that justice leads to Paradise and injustice leads to Hell (4:13-14).

This is followed by a passage about appropriate relationships with women (4:15 to 4:25). Allah notes that many people follow their lusts. Allah then tackles the problem of trade, financial transactions and murder. The subject matters shift to rules that govern Muslim families. Khaled notes that verse 4:34, which deals with disciplining women, can be misapplied when taken out of context. In 4:36, Allah orders people to worship Him alone and to do good (*ihsan*) to other members in society, whether near or far.

Allah then discusses justice and injustice. People must obey Allah, His Messenger⁶ and those in authority (4:59). However, when there are disputes, one has to refer back to Allah and His Messenger (4:65). In order to establish justice, fighting is maybe necessary (4:74-75). Rumours that are simply repeated without any investigation can become a form of injustice (4:83). Khaled then explores 4:105. A Muslim committed a crime and blamed a Jew for it. Another Muslim knew the truth but lied in order to protect his Muslim brother. Then 4:105 was revealed to highlight that justice must be universal, including for people of other religions. From 4:106 to 4:112, the seriousness of accusing an innocent person (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) is stressed. Khaled goes to 4:127 to stress the justice that women are entitled and then highlights 4:135 that summarises the objectives of this *suṭrah*. He then jumps to 4:160 and highlights the *āyat* that discuss the injustices committed by the people of the scriptures and their false beliefs.

Overall, Khaled's analysis is brief and he ignores certain parts of this *suṭrah*. The key point that seems relevant to Islamic management is that Muslim business leaders, managers and subordinates should always establish justice. People at work are accountable for all their decisions and they will have to give an exact accounting on the Day of Judgment.

⁶ Peace be upon Him. This formula is implied throughout the text whenever the prophet or the messenger is mentioned.

This is a perspective that is totally absent from conventional management. As Khaled shows, the Islamic perspective of justice is tied to belief in Allah, the Messenger and the Last Day. This leads to *taqwa* (piety) which leads to justice. Khan's analysis is similar but with some important differences.

Khan

Khan notes that this *sūrah* is paired with *sūrah al-Mā'idah*. Together, they establish the social ethics of Islam. A key problem in an Islamic society is hypocrisy so this problem will be explored in detail in this *sūrah* (one third of the *sūrah* discusses hypocrisy). The style of this *sūrah* is that Allah will explore a subject and then present universal lessons. He will then explore another subject and then turn again to universal lessons. However, these subjects are all related to the need to uphold justice.

In the opening *āyah*, Allah orders humanity to have *taqwa* twice; first, to have *taqwa* of your Lord (*Rabb*) and then to have *taqwa* of social relationships. Allah reminds humanity that we are all children of Adam. One of the first things that Islam did is destroy the foundation of any racist ideology. Thus, one demonstrates *taqwa* by being careful in relationships, especially with regards to women and orphans. Khan notes that there are two words for justice in Arabic, *qist* and '*adl*. *Qist* refers to private justice (e.g. a person declaring his taxes) whereas '*adl* refers to public justice (e.g. two individuals going to court to seek compensation). *Taqwa* is a pre-condition to justice.

From 4:5 to 4:9, Allah addresses various matters related to marriage gift, holding money in trust for orphans and the division of inheritance. Khan observes that to discharge these duties, Muslims need to have a sense of community. Orphans and people in need will not embarrass themselves by asking for their rights. Muslims need to know the situation of their fellow Muslims so that help can be given without them having to ask. After revealing the laws of inheritance, Allah makes entering Paradise conditional on obeying Allah and His Messenger, not simply believing in Allah and His Messenger (4:13). This is similar to the authentic narration in which the Messenger of Allah said,

"Everyone of my Ummah will enter Jannah except those who refuse". He was asked: "Who will refuse?" He said,

"Whoever obeys me, shall enter Jannah, and whosoever disobeys me, refuses to (enter Jannah)"⁷.

The ruling concerning women who have unlawful sexual intercourse are then explored and their social consequences. These are followed by rulings concerning treating wives with kindness (4:19). Allah summarises what He wants from people (4:26-28). Allah wants to educate people about what is lawful by exploring the practices of other people, accept repentance and reduce people's burdens. These burdens are often self-imposed when people follow cultural traditions rather than revelation.

Having explained the social etiquette, Allah explains the basis of an ethical economy as both are necessary in a healthy society. Both buyers and sellers must be committed to an ethical society and both sides must be happy with the transaction (4:29). In order to do this, people must focus on solving their major problems first (4:31). In 4:32, Allah discourages people from making social comparisons. Khan says that when one engages in social comparison, one is being ungrateful to Allah. Allah then says,

"Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and to parents be excellent (ihsan), and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbour, the neighbour farther away, the companion at your side, the traveller, and those whom your right hands possess. Indeed, Allah does not like those who are self-deluding and boastful." (4:36)

This *āyah* is critical. It is not enough to simply be just, one must possess excellent character to parents, neighbours, companions and even slaves. There is a difference of opinion on how best to translate *ihsan*. Khaled translates *ihsan* as "good" while Khan translates it as "excellent". In this *āyah*, *ihsan* is *maf'ul mutlaq* (simple-object). This grammatical construction is used to put emphasis so maybe "excellent" is closer in meaning⁸. This issue will be discussed later in this study.

Allah then highlights the justice of Allah in this life and the next (4:40-41). According to Khan, this is the overall theme of this *sūrah*. Khan spends some time analysing 4:41. Some people misunderstand the

⁷ Muhammad Ibn Ismail Al Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, Hadith No. 7280, [Http: www.sunnah.com/bukhari/96/12](http://www.sunnah.com/bukhari/96/12)

⁸ M.A. Ranginwala, *Essentials of Qur'ānic, Arabic* (Volume 2), New York: Islamic Learning Foundation, 2013), p. 115.

concept of the intercession of the Prophet. They end up relying on his intercession instead of living righteously. In 4:41, Allah reminds believers that the Prophet will be a witness on the Day of Judgment. This means that he will ask Allah to forgive good Muslims. What is rarely understood is that he will testify against bad Muslims. In the context of management, the Prophet will be a witness against unethical business leaders, unethical managers and unethical subordinates. The intercession of the Prophet is not a device that allows Muslims to cheat and lie in business and get away with it on the Day of Judgment.

Allah looks at the attitude of some of the corrupt leaders of the people of the Book. Although they have revelation, they started to believe in superstition (4:51). They prefer the polytheists to the Muslims as they are jealous of what was given to the Muslims (4:54). Allah then makes some universal points about justice. Khan analyses 4:58 and 4:59 in the light of executive, legislative and judicial power. He notes that Allah orders that all trusts have to be returned to the people – this requires putting the right people in positions of authority (4:58). If there is any dispute, settle the matter openly with justice (4:58). The right to legislate belongs to Allah and His Messenger and those in authority among you (4:59). Khan says that the structure of 4:59 indicates that the obedience to Allah and His Messenger is absolute but the obedience to the people of authority is relative.

Allah emphasises the central role of obeying the Messenger (4:60-66). Allah says:

“But no, by your Lord, they will not believe until they make you judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in [full, willing] submission” (4:65).

Obeying the Messenger was an issue that hypocrites found very difficult, which is why the latter part of this *suṭrah* deals extensively with hypocrites. Muslims need to believe that Allah’s commandments are good for them – whether they understand them or not (4:66). If they do, they will be guided to the Straight Path. This requires obeying Allah and His Messenger (4:69).

The next series of *āyat* test the obedience of the believers. In Madina, hypocrisy was a growing problem. Hypocrites were often in the first row during the prayer so it was impossible to know who was sincere and who wasn’t. However, the hypocrites became known because of their

reluctance to fight in battles. The believers however prefer the life of the Hereafter (4:71-75). Militant Islamic groups often misuse these *āyat*. To understand the proper context, one has to remember that the Prophet and his Companions struggled peacefully for 13 years to establish a just society in Makkah⁹. He only left because they were about to assassinate him and fighting was the only option left. Khan says that unless Muslims have a deep insight into social sciences, they are unable to fully understand when to apply these *āyat*. Commenting on 4:77, Khan notes that *jihad* in Makkah meant taking part in a movement of non-resistance in order to establish justice in Makkan society. This struggle was not simply to uphold the rights of Muslims, but to uphold the rights of all oppressed individuals. Allah then describes some of the attributes of the hypocrites (4:78-84). Allah concludes that these hypocrites must not reflect on the Qur'an. Allah says,

“Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an? If it had been from other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction” (4:82)

The implication of this *āyah* is that believers do reflect on the Qur'an. Allah describes the believers – they intercede for good causes (4:85). Khan discusses this point in some detail. Recommendations are often done to friends or relatives. However, believers should recommend anybody who is deserving of being helped – even if one has no close relationship with them. This is all part of the process of putting the right people in the right place. Similarly, recommending a person for the wrong reasons is a sin.

Allah then discusses the obligation of returning greetings of peace (4:94). One is not allowed to be suspicious of other Muslims as this one of the traits of the times of ignorance. This is followed by a series of *āyat* concerning *jihad* and the prayer in a state of fear (4:90-102). Khan comments that the importance of the prayer cannot be stressed enough. Our main priorities throughout the day must be linked to increasing the quality of our prayers (4:103).

Allah continues to encourage the Muslims to strive against injustice. Even though both parties are facing difficulty, the believers have a high expectation from Allah (4:104). This is followed by a series of *āyat* that involves a dispute between a Muslim and a Jew. The evidence for

⁹ For example, T. Ramaḍān, *The Messenger: The Meanings of the Life of Muhammad*, (London: Penguin, 2007).

the case was clear and the Muslim was guilty. However, the tribe came out to support the wrongdoer by using religion as an excuse. Before the matter was brought to the Prophet, an *āyah* was revealed ordering him not to be swayed by these emotional arguments. A judge must hold himself to the highest level of personal integrity. By extension, this *āyah* applies to all Muslims who need to judge a situation. Khan argues that before deciding something, one must imagine oneself defending the decision on the Day of Judgment.

Allah then switches to private meetings. Allah forbids private meetings that undermine formal meetings (4:114). If something is discussed in a meeting, one has to speak up on the issue. If one is silent, one is not allowed to gather co-workers after the meeting and criticise the decisions made in the formal meeting. Allah explains that this inappropriate behaviour has one source – Satan (4:120). By contrast, Allah's promises are true and believers will enter Paradise (4:122). Nobody will enter Paradise by their wishful thinking (4:123). Allah then describes those people who follow the religion of Ibrahim and reach the state of *ihsan*. Khan notes that one thing that distinguishes the person of *ihsan* is that he is fully aware that Allah owns everything and encompasses everything (4:126).

Allah switches to polygamy (4:129). Some Muslims, when discussing polygamy, only quote 4:03. However, Allah completes the discussion about polygamy in 4:129. Allah's summary on the matter is that it is lawful but it is a very delicate matter and most people will not be able to be just in this matter. Khan notes that in some Muslim countries, polygamy is socially acceptable. In other Muslim countries, it is not. It is not enough to simply know the shari'ah, one must fully understand the cultural context and social ramifications of polygamy.

Allah then emphasises how real faith leads to justice (4:136). Those who don't uphold justice end up being ungrateful to Allah (4:137). Allah describes the mindset of the hypocrites. They sit in the company of people who make fun of the religion. They get desensitized and end-up questioning Allah's laws and wisdom. Another aspect of hypocrisy is that seek protective friendships (*awliyah*) from non-Muslims. These *āyah* need to be understood in their proper context. Most of the Qur'an encourages Muslims to engage non-Muslims in a sincere, friendly and in-

telligent manner¹⁰. Throughout the Qur'an, Allah orders the Muslims to fight for the rights of any oppressed person, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. In many cases, Muslims would seek out their friends and invite them to Islam. Due to their bonds of friendship, many non-Muslims considered the message carefully. However, by the time this *āyah* is revealed, there is a state of war between Muslims and non-Muslims. In this particular situation, one's loyalty has to be to the Muslims.

In the next passage, Allah describes the believers as holding on to Allah by holding on to the Qur'an sincerely (4:146). If you do so, Allah will appreciate it (4:147). Allah switches to a new social problem. Allah does not like when people publicly talk about sins (4:148). Another social problem is addressed. Allah highlights that one aspect of disbelief is differentiating between the messengers. Khan argues that in today's situation, this approach takes multiple forms. These include i) emphasizing Qur'an only and questioning the validity of the Sunnah, or ii) arguing that all religions call to goodness and that we should therefore emphasize "common values" and not talk about "controversial things." This watered down approach was not taught by Prophet.

Having explored the mindset of the hypocrites and the disbelievers, Allah exposes the mindset of the people of the Book. It is the same mindset. They are not convinced that the Prophet is a real prophet. They have no real knowledge and they simply follow their assumptions (4:157). Allah criticises them for taking *riba* and being involved in economic injustice (4:161). Khan says that the nature of *riba* is that it automatically leads to economic injustice. One can conclude that it is impossible to have *ihsan* while being involved in *riba*.

In the last section of this *sūrah*, the importance of the Messengers is emphasised (4:165). Those who reject them and prevent others from the truth are astray (4:167). Allah then says, "*O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion*" (4:171). Khan argues that Islam is about balancing multiple responsibilities. It is about balancing this life with the Hereafter. Business people, for example, can become so focused on making money that they ignore their other responsibilities. Khan explains that extremism often happens when a person takes one issue and makes his understanding of the whole religion revolve around that issue. Extremism is a gradual, incremental process. The *sūrah* finishes with

¹⁰ See Ramaḍān's *The Messenger* in which he explores the friendships between Muslims and non-Muslims as practiced by the Prophet and his companions.

Allah noting that Isa ibn Maryam does not disdain from being the slave of Allah (4:172).

There are similarities between the explanations of Khaled and Khan. With regards to the differences, for some reason, Khaled did not highlight the āyat concerning hypocrisy even though it makes up one third of the sūrah. There are many management lessons in this sūrah – the importance of justice, the proper conduct of meetings, recommending the right people and not recommending the wrong people. However, this author will focus on 4:36. In the context of management, this āyah implies that all Muslim managers should have *ihsan* towards their subordinates (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) and subordinates should have *ihsan* towards their managers. It is therefore critical to explore the concept of *ihsan* further.

The Concept of *Ihsan*

As noted above, the concept of *ihsan* is difficult to translate into English. However, one can get a sense of the word by looking at Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the People of *Ihsan*

<i>Ayah</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	Have <i>taqwa</i> of Allah and <i>taqwa</i> of social relationships. <i>Taqwa</i> means being cautious because you know Allah is watching you
13	Obey Allah and His Messenger, as it is a precondition to entering Paradise
28	Obey cultural practices places a burden on people
31	Focus on major problems first
32	Do not engage in social comparison
69	Obey the Prophet in all aspects
74	Prefer the Hereafter over this worldly life
77	Use non-violent resistance to establish social justice for all
82	Reflect on the Qur'an
85	Intercede for a good cause without seeking any personal gain
94	Return greetings of peace, without doubting people's faith
103	Pray in congregation with full concentration
104	Have high expectations from Allah
105	Have high ethical standard towards non-Muslims

**Surah Al-Nisā': Some Lessons for Muslim Business Leaders Based on the 326
Works of Khaled and Khan**

114	Avoid private meetings organised for deceitful activities
126	Be aware that Allah owns everything and encompasses everything
146	Hold firmly to the rope of Allah by reciting and understanding the Qur'an
161	Refuse to take <i>riba</i> and refuse to be involved in economic injustice
171	Have a balanced understanding of Islam and a balanced lifestyle
<hr/>	
So	36 Do <i>ihsan</i> to people around you
.....	

Table 1 shows the multiple facets of *ihsan*. Let us consider the word itself. Yusuf¹¹ notes that *ihsan* comes from the root *ha-sa-na* which means to make something beautiful. He said that *ishan* used to be common in the Muslim world. However, when the Muslims were colonized, Islamic resistance movement focused on fighting colonialism. They stressed the legalistic interpretation of Islam and forgot *ihsan*. According to Yusuf, *ihsan* has become the “*forgotten teaching of Islam*”. He says that the main reason why people do not have *ihsan* is love of positions and procrastination, the ultimate procrastination being denying one’s death. Yusuf quotes the narration in which the Prophet was asked about *Iman*, *Islam* and *Ihsan*. With regards to *ihsan*, the Prophet said that you should worship Allah knowing that He sees you.¹² Implicit in this narration is that one is always aware of the reality of death and the reality of the Day of Judgment.

With regards to death, Yusuf¹³ argues that people can experience a “spiritual death” in this life. This is when become absolutely certain of one’s own mortality. This awareness changes the way one sees the world and this leads to *ihsan*. He says that when one has embraced spiritual death, one finds meaning in one life and post traumatic growth follows.

¹¹ H. Yūsuf, *The Concept of Ihsān*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLhogmk-Wug&t=2120s>, 2011.

¹² This narration was recorded in Muslim. See J.D. Zarabozo, “*He Came to Teach You Your Religion*”, (Boulder CO: Al Basheer 1997). One section of the narration reads, “(*Ihsān*) is that you worship Allah as if you see Him. And even though you do not see Him, [you know] He sees you.”

¹³ H. Yusuf, *Death*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYSrFWbMong>, 2011

He gives the example of Lee Atwater. Lee Atwater was the campaign manager of George Bush in the 1980s. He was famous for his unethical campaign strategy. In March 1990, he was told that he had a tumour on the right side of his brain. Overnight, he was transformed. He publicly apologized to all the people he had hurt over the years¹⁴. Internalising death can be a liberating event as one realises that most of our daily pursuits are really meaningless. Kübler-Ross¹⁵ wrote,

“(Death) is an integral part of our lives that gives meaning to human existence. If you can see death as an invisible but friendly companion on your life’s journey- gently reminding you not to wait till tomorrow to do what you mean to do- then you can learn to live life rather than simply passing through it.”

As a psychiatrist, she conducted “Death and Dying Seminars” in which patients with chronic illnesses were invited to talk about their life. A recurring theme was regret. As one patient said, *“If I could only do my life over, and know what I know now, I would do it so differently.”* She found that reflecting on death helps people to live well. This has always been part of the Islamic tradition. There are many narrations in which the Prophet encouraged Muslims to think about death. For example, Ibn Umar said,

“I was with the Messenger of Allah and a man from among the Ansar came to him and greeted the Prophet with Salam. Then he said: ‘O Messenger of Allah, which of the believers is best?’ He said: ‘He who has the best manners among them.’ He said: ‘Which of them is wisest?’ He said: ‘The one who remembers death the most and is best in preparing for it. Those are the wisest.’”¹⁶

In the context of Islamic management, this author has shown that developing a corporate culture that reflects Islamic principles is easy and cost-effective¹⁷. Over the last ten years, more than 3,000 of his students have watched Islamic videos and completed diaries. With hindsight, most of their diaries deal with living – how to be a better Muslim, who to bet-

¹⁴ New York Times, *Gravely Ill, Atwater Offers Apology*. 13 January 1991.

¹⁵ E. Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, (New York: Touchstone, 1975).

¹⁶ Abu Abdillah Muhammad Ibn Yazid, Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Hadith 4259, <https://sunnah.com/urn/1293620>

¹⁷ For example, R. Fontaine, K. Ahmad, and G. Oziev. *Islamic Leadership Today*, (Gombak: ICIFE, 2017).

ter understand a *surah*, what is the ruling concerning music and so forth – rather than dying. One can develop an understanding of Islam without internalising death. Internalising death would bring the rituals of Islam – especially the daily prayers – to a completely different level. Ideally, in every prayer, Muslims should experience a “spiritual death” so that everyday becomes a special day.

The author wants to reflect on *ihsan* at the workplace. *Ihsan* is often translated as “excellent” in English. In the management literature, excellence is often associated with “high productivity” rather than beautiful behaviour. Unfortunately, the culture of productivity that dominates the current management discourse leads to employees suffering from serious health problems due to high-levels of stress.¹⁸ In many cases, people work long hours and this leads to families where children are growing up without parents.¹⁹ Workplace violence, stress, aggression, discrimination, sexual harassment, politics, side deals, careerism, bullying, drug abuse, retaliation, incivility and theft are common.²⁰ This author is certain that “a culture of *ihsan*” is not the same as the “culture of productivity” as it is understood in the management literature. As Table 1 shows, *ihsan* is more related to justice and good social interactions rather than simply increasing productivity. Yet, these good social interactions seem to happen in the better organisations. For example, Collins²¹ shows that the most profitable organisations are organisations where people love one another. Collins analysed 1,435 publicly listed organisations in the United States. He analysed the 11 most successful and he found a remarkable fact. Successful companies have created a corporate culture where people at the top level love one another. This seems to be the essence of *ihsan*.

¹⁸ S.J. Tracey, Managing burnout and moving towards employee engagement: Reinvigorating the study of stress at work, In Lutgen-Sandvik and Syphen (Eds.), *Destructive Organisational Communication: Process, Consequences and Constructive Ways of Organising*, (New York: Routledge, 2009, 78-98).

¹⁹ S.M.B. Wieland, J.C. Bauer, and S. Deetz, Excessive Careerism and destructive life stresses: the role of entrepreneurialism in colonising identities. In Lutgen-Sandvik and Syphen (Eds.), *Destructive Organisational Communication: Process, Consequences and Constructive Ways of Organising*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 99-120.

²⁰ S. Linstead, G. Marechal, and R.W. Griffin, Theorizing and Researching the Dark Side of Organizations, *Organization Studies*, Vol 35(2), 2014, 165-188.

²¹ J. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*, (New York: Random House, 2001).

The question is whether Muslim business leaders can develop such a culture in their organisations.

Developing an Islamic Corporate Culture in Organisations

Research indicates that Muslim business leaders can develop organisations whose corporate culture reflects Islamic principles²². The general rules are:

- a) Top management must have a vision of developing a corporate culture that reflect Islamic values.
- b) Top management must provide the necessary educational processes and proper incentives to turn that vision into a reality.
- c) The human resource management can use a variety of methods to develop such a culture. However, it will probably rely on education rather than training²³.

To develop the Islamic personality of Muslim employees, researchers found that it often beneficial to combines educational inputs (e.g. watching Islamic videos) with a diary in which participants write their reflections. Over time, their spiritual intelligence increases and this increases can be measured using an internationally recognised instrument²⁴. The cost for developing an Islamic corporate culture is very low. The author wanted to test whether the same processes could be used to develop *ihsan* with students.

Experiments to Develop *Ihsan*

Inspired by the work of Kübler-Ross, he assumes that most people do not want to think of old age and death. There are several reasons for this but one of them is that individuals tend to live their life in a linear, forward looking manner. This approach is known as “hill climbing”. This term is used to indicate individuals who focus on short-term goals²⁵. This short-term perspective prevents them from seeing better ways of

²² See, R. Fontaine, and K.’s Ahmad, *Strategic Management from an Islamic perspective*, (Singapore: John Wiley, 2013), or R. Fontaine, K. Ahmad, and G. Oziev’s, *Islamic Leadership Today*.

²³ Training events are usually one-day workshops. Such events are good to develop specific skills but they generally don’t change people’s attitude as this requires emancipatory learning. See B. Delahaye, *Human Resource Development*, (Brisbane: John Wiley, 2000), pp 39-46.

²⁴ See Fontaine, Ahmad and Oziev’s, *Islamic Leadership Today*.

²⁵ S.I. Robertson, *Problem Solving*, (Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2001) p. 39.

living their life²⁶. However, a better approach is to use Covey's advice to "start with the end in mind"²⁷. One should imagine oneself on the Day of Judgment explaining one's life choices. This shift in perspective allows one to make better decisions.

To develop this "starting with the end in mind" perspective, the author's students collected the history of their elders. In September 2017, he asked 102 undergraduate students to work in groups of four. Each person had to interview four elders that they knew well. They asked them about their goals, hopes, fears and disappointments in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s. Each group compiled the life story of 16 people and analysed the results. A total of 26 reports were submitted by the end of December 2017.

The similarities in the lives of the respondents were predictable – all of the respondents had financial problems and most had family problems. The respondents' recommendations were also very predictable – always get closer to Allah, have more quality time with your family and acquire more knowledge. But the process of collecting the life stories of older people was a revelation for the students involved. For most of them, it was often the first time that they learned about the early sacrifices that their parents made. They often heard of details of their own family that they didn't know about. For most of them, it was the first time that they systematically collected the life experiences of older people and spent a large portion of the semester thinking and writing a report about it. For many students, this was a very personal experience. Some of the comments include,

"As the last child of eight siblings, there are not a lot of things that I got to witness from my parents' struggle. When I was growing up, we were already financially stable. The assignment opened my eyes to concerns that they had about us that I never knew before. Thank you for the assignment sir. More than anything, I want to give back to my parents."

"This assignment challenged my thoughts. I used to think that people from different countries and different cultures led different lifestyles. I now realised that no matter which

²⁶ This sounds judgemental but it is the summary of Kübler-Ross's findings.

²⁷ S. R. Covey, *The seven habits of highly successful people*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

country people come from, they are basically the same. Every parent is concerned about our future and our education. I got to know my parents better. There are so many things they never told me about. Or maybe I never asked them before!”

“I found this assignment was the most effective way to get closer to my family members. I have found something new about the meaning of my life. When I interviewed my parents, I was deeply upset when they told me about their struggles and my eyes filled up with tears. Later I realised that it’s all about relying on Allah and that I wanted to serve humanity. “

“Doing this assignment made me realise the importance of seeking advice from elders. We should not rush into making decisions alone. Before this, I was not comfortable seeking the advice of elderly people, but now I have the confidence and interest in approaching them for advice.”

“This assignment was life-changing for us. The interviews were among the best moments of our lives. We are not the same individuals that we were before this assignment.”

Participants were asked about the effectiveness of the project (see Table 2).

Table 2: Feedback from Participants

	N	Percentage
Do you think you have become wiser (i.e. you better understand some of the challenges you will face in the future)?		
a. Yes	46	78%
b. Not sure	12	20.3%
c. No difference	1	1.7%
Has it improved your relationship with your family?		
a. Yes	40	68%
b. Not sure	9	15.2%
c. No difference	10	16.8%
Would you advise me to continue giving this assignment?		
a. Yes, definitely	43	74%

**Surah Al-Nisā': Some Lessons for Muslim Business Leaders Based on the 332
Works of Khaled and Khan**

b. Not sure	8	14%
c. No give another assignment	7	12%

In March 2018, the author conducted another experiment with about 55 students. They were asked to read “*Death and Dying*” and present their thoughts and reflections on selected chapters. These chapters covered the stages of grief. They had to present their readings in class and discuss the topics. They were asked to investigate the case of family members who died without a medical reason or who died young.

By April 2018, they presented their reflections. The author listened to the presentations, engaged the students in group discussions and collected anonymous answers to general questions. The results were overwhelming positive. Some of the written (anonymous) comments are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Comments about Death and Dying

	<i>Comments</i>
1	I want to study this much more. Many students think death is only for old people. The more they think about it, the more they will prepare themselves and do good deeds.
2	I now realise that I have been wasting my life. I feel guilty for my sins. I realise that I am too slow to change, that it is difficult but that it is worth it.
3	I now regret delaying my repentance.
4	My father died of cancer three years ago. I was curious and nervous about this project because it brought back so many memories. However, it makes me better appreciate life.
5	Feel empty inside because I still have a lot to do about my sins before I die
6	It makes me think about how to be a better person each day
7	When I think of death, I always feel that I am not a good Muslim yet, so it makes me want to change
8	When I think of death, I decrease my time spent on unnecessary things and I spend more time on my prayers
9	I thought about the stages (in the book) and I found that they make sense
10	It keeps reminded me to repent before death and to do more good deeds

There were major concerns about repentance and erasing sins. We discussed this issue by reviewing the steps towards a successful repentance.

During the group discussions, one of the themes was wasting time. Many students realise that they are wasting time and thinking about death helps them re-prioritise their time. Another concern was the way death is discussed in religious talks in Malaysia. The emphasis is on the questioning in the grave, on the punishment of Hell. A show of hands showed that virtually nobody had heard anything positive about death – not even the description of Paradise. These comments led this author to research how the Prophet talked about death. By and large, the Prophet presented this life as journey. Everyone is returning to Allah. Similarly, the Qur'an emphasises the idea of returning to Allah, not simply dying.

Another theme in the discussion is that when people think about death, they become less selfish. One student shared her experience when her friend died at the age of 21 and how this experience changed her outlook on life.

The stage that the students could relate to the most was depression. The discussion included personal stories, watching a rap video whose theme was depression, and slowly veered towards the problems of loneliness and addiction to internet pornography.

These sessions require facilitators that have a counselling background as we touched upon many sensitive issues. For example, it became clear that many psychological problems – such as addiction and loneliness – are framed in a religious manner (e.g. “*people are depressed because they don't pray*”) even though they are not religious problems. Facilitators must expect conversations to deviate from the initial topic but all conversations are important as they reflect the concerns of participants. For example, the discussion on loneliness was an eye-opener. The overwhelming majority of students feel lonely and statistics indicate that loneliness is a bigger predictor of strokes and heart-problems than smoking cigarettes. Similarly, addiction to internet pornography is a major problem that is not acknowledged. Yet, once a conversation on these topics is initiated, solutions to remedy these problems can be found. If the wrong facilitators are hired, rather than promoting *ihsan*, they may unwittingly reinforce prejudices and make participants dealing with problems feel more miserable.

Generally, these experiments – collecting the history of elders and reading “death and dying” – seem to have positive psychological bene-

fits. They certainly complement well the efforts to develop an Islamic corporate culture. Further research can confirm or disconfirm this finding (using quantitative techniques for example).

Conclusion

Sūrah al-Nisā' is very rich and justice is a key theme. This author focused on *ihsan*, as it includes justice but goes beyond it. *Ihsan* implies goodness, excellence and beauty. As Table 1 shows, *ihsan* is a comprehensive concept whose outcome is *taqwa* of Allah and *taqwa* of social relationships. These two dimensions of *taqwa* have to be separated because Allah distinguishes them in this surah. In particular, *taqwa* of social relationships means being just to non-Muslims (4:105). It is impossible to understand this *sūrah* without appreciating that the Qur'an promotes an inclusive version of Islam.

To develop *ihsan*, one must internalise that one is going to die soon, that Allah is always observing us and that every deed will be counted. Two experiments – collecting the history of elders and discussing “death and dying” – seem to indicate that appropriate modules could be developed to get everyone in an organisation thinking about *ihsan*. The author cannot stress the difference between knowing about *ihsan* and thinking about it. Everyone knows we are going to die. Thinking about it by swapping personal stories or watching videos makes death seem more natural and more real. The spiritual and psychological benefits of developing *ihsan* are immense as it seems that thinking about death allow us to simply live better.

From a management perspective, developing *ihsan* in organisations may not be as difficult as one might assume. Top management must have the vision and put in place the right processes. However in practice, the experiments described above show that the process of change is quite straightforward. These processes would require hiring facilitators with a counselling background but the cost of doing so seems marginal.

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