MODERATION: THE RIGHT EPISTEMOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CRISIS

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A Paper presented to:

The 24th World International Congress on Islamic Unity under the theme:

Intellectual and Application Methoss for Rapprochement of the Islamic Schools of Thought in Tahran from February 19-21

By:

Dr. Omar Jah Jr.

Ag. Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Admin and Finance

The University of the Gambia

ojah@utg.edu.gm E.mail:

In Surah 2: 143, Allah says:

Thus we have made you moderate Muslims (ummatan wasatan) a just and best folk that you be witness over mankind and the messenger be witness over you[1]

And in Sahih al-Bukhari, Sayyidah ‘Aishah is reported to have narrated that the Prophet once entered her house and there was one lady and he said:

“Who is this”? She is Miss. X, saying some of her prayers, Sayyidah ‘Aishah replied: “Slow down, act according to you ability I swear that Allah will never get bored (of rewarding you) until you get bored[2]” (of worshipping) and the best form of worship to the Prophet was that which the servant persists on

Introduction

The roots of the world crises today is neither economic nor cultural not even social but the root of crises is the corruption of knowledge. At any point in time, world supermarkets store more than the world population can consume, yet, starvation is getting increasingly worrying. Families are expanding, yet relationships are getting more strained. Disciplines in medicine and medical treatment are getting more diversified and specialized, yet, diseases are becoming more incurable. In the far past, man used to live in what we call primitive jungles and was said to be less enlightened, yet he was less harmful because he was regulated by the primitive law. Today science and technology are more advanced, pacts and treaties in the like of UNITED NATIONS are often concluded, man is claimed to be more enlightened, yet we are still living in a modern and post modern jungles where human lives especially that of a Muslim are unjustly consumed daily with the most sophisticated war machinery regulated by a state of lawlessness and paranoia. The root cause for all these is the corruption of knowledge.

The Muslim world does not live in isolation with this reality. In fact, since the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, the Muslim world has been totally absorbed in an epistemology foreign to Islam. The objectives of the Shari’ah as enshrined in such works like al-Muwafaqaat by Imam al-Shatibi, have been attached to an epistemology guided by the Islamic worldview (al-wasatiyyah), moderation. It is however, very difficult for moderation to succeed in the environment of reciprocal extremisms:

Like the laws of physics, socially, any extreme social action is followed by extreme social reaction. The post- modernity[3] has its relevance and good values. However, its crises seem

to overshadow such values. Before the split of atom, modernity went to the extreme of its denial of religious values, and by so doing sowing the seed of secular materialism[4] (an extreme form of atheism). Extremism begets extremism and unfortunately, this form of secular extremism has been the world dominant philosophy for centuries and has eventually begotten a strong opposite form of religious extremism

-After the split of atom and the birth of post-modernity, the epistemology of de constructionism has added to the sinking of the wasatiyyah mindset and has impeded a proper understanding of the Shari'ah and its objectives by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

It is this new paradigm that has mainly led to the real crises of the 21st century, which has manifested itself in Muslim disunity, fragmentation and most dangerously hopelessness and absence of common strategies to regain the world leadership or even independence during the 21st century

This article examines the concept of moderation as the basis of the Shari'ah and hypothesizes that wasatiyyah is the proper mindset to regenerate Muslim unity and to stabilize the 21st century world crises. We will attempt to define to the concept of wasatiyyah and extremism in the context of current paradigm of international relations and try to prove that it is the only values of moderation that position the Muslim Ummah in its proper place during the 21st century

1.0 Al-WASATIYYAH AND EXTREMISM: A DEFIITION

2-Al-wasatiyyah can literally be translated as moderation, the word and its derivatives occur in the Qur'an five times: in Surahs: al-Baqarah, 2: 143 and 138, in al-Maidah, 5: 89, in al-Qalam, 68: 28, and in al-'Aadiyaat, 100: 5.

And looking into all these verses, although they address different contexts, they are all alluding to the best of that context. In the case of 2: 238, it refers to the 'Asr prayer,

in the case of 5: 89, it refers to the best food, in case of 68: 28, it refers to the best companion, in the case 100: 5, it refers to the best type of horse, and in the case of 2: 143, the word refers to the best ummah. This meaning gets stronger if verse 2: 143 is read in relation to the verse Ali ‘Imraan, 3: 110 that describes the ummah of the Prophet as “the best” ummah.

It is however, worthy of note that verse 3: 110, shows that being the best, WASATI, is -earned rather than just divinely given. It is earned through al-amr bil-ma’ruf wa nahy anil unkar, (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is bad). What this means is that moderation is the property of the Shari’ah and extremism is a non-Islamic property and Muslims are tasked to maintain moderation by re-orienting those who are inclined to extremism through the mechanism of al-amr bil-ma’ruf

Al-wasatiyyah can technically be defined as: a state between two extremes: one is excess and the other is negligence. What makes moderation the best of any context is that it is a state between two blameworthy extremes. In al-Furqaan, 25: 67, Allah say:

And those who when they spend are neither extravagant nor niggardly but hold a medium (way) between those extremes

The issue of witnessing over mankind as quoted above in verse 2: 143 is only possible when the one who witnesses has his place in the middle of the events to be able to see them properly. So, an extremist i.e. someone who positions him or herself at the extremes will not be able to witness the events properly. The Prophet will therefore witness over all of mankind because he is the most moderate of all.

In the field of Ibadaat, devotional acts, moderation is the ability to worship Allah between hope raghban and fear rahaban as in Surah al-Anbiyaa, 21: 90 or the ability to persist on limited scale of sincere obedience to Allah as in the hadith quoted above rather than involving in unlimited scale that cannot be sustained.

The term al-wasatiyyah can be used interchangeably with the word al-hikmah (wisdom) or the -word al-‘adaalah (justice). It is the ability to harmonize al-zaahir (the inward) with al

baatin (the outward).

In order to achieve this, harmony has to be struck between the mundane and the spiritual realm. It is essentially for this reason that excesses in the commission or the omission of all acts have been curtailed. Islam teaches that man's success lies neither in asceticism nor in materialism, that man should neither shun nor renounce material, nor be enslaved and motivated by it. Islam advocates a just balance between the two extremes. It adopts a balance between the spiritual development of an individual and his material needs

Most importantly, it is the ability to see unity in diversity and to accommodate and to tolerate divergence of views as long as they do not contravene the fundamentals of faith. In the field of politics, moderation means avoidance of excess in ruling. One of the biggest problems causing disunity and unrest for Muslims is excess in ruling. Today most of the leaders of the Arab world have been ruling excessively by being there for a long time and worst all they are above the laws they promulgate, the present crises in Tunisia is the best example.

We have realized that most of the violent relationships emanate from extremism either between Muslims and non-Muslims on one side or between Islamic sects on the other. Our intellectual markets are most of the time flooded with books that create and sustain sectarian extremism: the Sunnah against the Shi’ah and within the Sunnah attacks and counter attacks between for example opponent and supporters of al-Tasawwuf

Surah 2: Verse 143 stated earlier shows clearly that moderation is an Islamic virtue, which makes all Muslims at all platforms brothers and sisters as one body so that they together can serve as witnesses for others. So, the impact of moderation serves more as a vehicle of international relations than national relations amongst Muslims.

1.1-DEFINITION OF EXTREMISM

The definition and importance of moderation cannot complete and be appreciated until the word extremism is defined.

Currently, due to the world media, the Arabic word al-tatarruf has been extensively used to denote extremism.

Let me nonetheless claim that the term tatarruf although originally and literally Arabic[5] it is technically borrowed from the secular Western worldview. Like the word Usuli, which has frequently been used even by the media in Muslim countries as a translation for the English word “fundamentalism” The word tatarruf is a direct translation of the English word extremism.

We are bombarded every now and then with expressions such as al-tatarruf al-Islaami (Islamic extremism) or al-Ususli al-Islaami (Islamic fundamentalism) but not Christian or Jewish extremism even though the extremism of the Zionist state, ETA in Spain and the lessons of the Irish terrorism are very fresh in our memory.

The Western media cunningly coin such terminologies with negative connotations to further play with the Muslim mind in favor of their national and Western interest. So once a group branded as extremists or terrorists turn around to serve the Western interest-even though they may remain using the same bloody weapons- they cease to be branded so, and the opposite is also the case[6]. By the same token, the term jihad, which was acceptable during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, has become scary and sinful during the present western occupation of Afghanistan. It is the same media, which has classified the Muslim world into moderate[7] and extremist states

1.2-EXTREMISM IN THE LANGUAGE THE SHARI’AH

If tatarruf is technically proven to be a translation from a foreign worldview, what is the Qur’anic term used to denote extremism?

The term al-ghuluwwu has occurred twice in the Qur’an to denote extremism: In a-Nisa, 4: 171, Allah says:

O’ people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Do not exceed the limits in your religion

nor say of Allah aught but the truth. The Messiah Isa , son of Maryam was a messenger of Allah and His word, which he bestowed on Maryam…

And al-Maidah, 5: 77, Allah says:

Say (O Muhammad) O’ the people of the Scripture exceed not the limits in your religion other than the truth and do not follow the vain desires of people who went astray in times gone by, and who misled many, and strayed from the right path

And in the subsequent verses 78 and 79, the reason for their extremism has been stated as: “they used not to forbid one another from the munkar, sins and polytheism, which they committed”

So, in the Islamic legacy, the word ghuluww is the word that connotes extremism and enjoining what is good and forbidding what is bad is the mechanism to remove ghuluww and to maintain wasatiyyah. What is more essential in moderation however, is that what is good and what is bad is decided by Allah alone through His prophets

The Shari’ah however, did not stop at explaining the criteria for extremism but has also adopted a moderate style through al-amr bil ma’ruf (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is bad) to invite the people of the Scriptures to wasatiyyah. The following verses are a proof to that:

In Surah Ali Imran, 3: 64, Allah says:

O’ people of the Scripture come to a word that is just between us and you that we worship none but Allah and that we associate no partners with Him and that none of us shall take others as Lords besides Allah, then if they turn away say: “Bear witness that we are Muslims”

In the same Surah verse 61, Allah says:

Then whosoever disputes with you concerning him (‘Isa) after all the knowledge that has come to you , say: “ Come let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves- then we pray and invoke the course of Allah upon those who lie”

And in Surah Saba', 34: 24, Allah says:

Say (O Muhammad) "who gives you provision from the heavens and the earth?" Say: Allah, and verily "we or you are rightly guided or in a plain error"

Central in the epistemology of wasatiyyah, are the virtues of humbleness, humility and -readiness for self criticism and acceptance of once error. As a result, in all the above stated verses, the Prophet, though was a perfect man, something even his opponents recognized, used an effective method of putting himself first in the line of fire.
After the demise of the Prophet, the Companions used the same method to a large extent and doctrines were developed in ethics of disagreements. The saying: "my opinion is right but probably wrong and the opinion of my opponent is wrong but probably right" is a good method used by the upright ancestors in fighting extremism and in sustaining moderation.

Today, humility to accept probability of error or mistake in one's opinion or the opinion of his Shiekh (spiritual master) is most of the time absent.

As earlier stated, the 21st century generation of Muslims are bombarded with information in terms of books, magazines, films and the internet, information that do not meet the requirements of the virtues outlined above and as a result, can be termed as information that generates al-ghuluww, extremism in our youths and makes the Muslim dream of the world leadership or even gaining real independence in the 21st century a far-fetched dream

2.0-WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

In the midst of the post-modern epistemology, the Shari'ah, as stated in Surah 6: verse 153: (And verily, this is my strait path so follow it and follow not other paths…) and as the source of true understanding of moderation, has been long neglected and misunderstood.

The reason for this is multi-facetted. However, for the sake of this paper, let me claim that, two main processes have negatively contributed to the world reciprocal extremism of

today.

Any observer of the international relations for some times can bear witness that this situation is mainly due to the processes of: a) Westernization of Christianity and b) Zionaization of the West:

a) Christianity as was revealed to Jesus Christ (pbuh) was originally an eastern religion; it was born in Palestine for local consumption for a period that would link Jesus to the Prophet Muhammad (pbut). And because of this nature, Christianity of Jesus Christ did not carry with it the ingredients of universality.

However, three decades after the demise of Jesus, Saint Paul embarked on the process of Christianization of the West. Despite the fact that such a process was supported by the Emperor Constantine, the project failed due mainly to the lack of universal ingredients. The failure led to the opposite result, instead of Christianizing the West, Christianity was westernized[8] carrying all elements of Western civilization, the most dangerous of which was belief in SECULAR MATERIALISM. This situation shifted the original relationship of sympathy and understanding between Islam and Christianity and cloaked it with Western antagonism to Islam.

b) Had the situation stopped at step (a), the relationship could have been easily mended in favor of moderation. The sad thing is that this step was followed by a bitter one, which is Zionization of the West. Zionism is the belief in a promised land situated in other peoples' land, Palestinian land by a minority of extremist Jews.

Any observer of the 21st century world politics will realize the Zionist control over the United States of America in particular and all other Western countries in general. The Arab Israeli conflict has exposed the weaknesses of the Western countries vis a vis the Zionist state. The giant world superpowers act like dwarfs before their masters in Israel, and as such have lost all their credibility. Western countries have often been embarrassed by Israel; a country that works against all the values like democracy and rule of law the West used to claim ownership of and as such exposed their hypocrisy.

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Can the West change this? All the signs are negative, not even with Barack Obama. The reason for that is that the West has been heavily Zionized[9]. The bloodiest yet military invasion of the 21st century is taking place in Iraq and Afghanistan. NATO under the leadership of America have been involving in eliminating Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and threatening Iran just to appease and to secure the Zionist state

It is interesting to note at this juncture that reciprocal extremism between Jewish nationalism in terms of Zionism and Arab nationalism in terms of Arabization of Islam has adversely contributed in consolidating world extremism[10]

3.0-BUT ARE WE MUSLIMS SUPPOSED TO WAIT FOR THEM TO CHANGE THIS?

One of the most fundamental reasons why the West will not change its behavior is that Muslims are waiting and relying on them to do so. Another reason is the absence of viable Muslim project in the Middle East. Such a project could have encouraged president Obama to fulfill some of his announced ambitious promises made against Israel

4.0-CONCLUSION: HOW IS THIS CHANED?

The two processes stated above happened gradually taking long time collective planning. Positive change also needs long time collective planning.

It is only through re-instilling of the concept of Wasatiyyah in the young and thus a better understanding of the Shri’ah that this changed can come about.

The Shari’ah is all-embracing system of life. The Prophet and the upright ancestors lived the true Shari’ah through the ethics of disagreements and as such they were able most of the times to live in peace with all divergence of views and schools of thought even though they used to have deep doctrinal disagreements with non-Muslims and disagreement in secondary issues amongst themselves. It was their application of wasatiyyah that the Shari’ah spread like bush fire all over the world.

The Islamic definitions of moderation and extremism are not presently the operational one in the world today. Since the collapse of Soviet Union and especially after 9\11 and coming into power of the Neo-Conservatives in the United States, [11] the shift in the concept of moderation and extremism has become intensified.
It is widely believed that the philosophy of the Clash of Civilization as exposed by Samuel Huntington in his book The Clash of Civilization and Remaking of the New World Order was espoused by the Neo Cons.

Although a former American Ambassador to Malaysia, Mr. Wolf tried to reject this view[12] the former president Bush's famous expression: "You are either with us or with the terrorists" supports the opposite view.

This new meaning of "who is and who is not with us" has strongly been exported to the world by the merciless world media that has duly and unduly influenced the Muslim language and behavior.

Part of this influence is the intensification of coinage and re-coinage of terminologies to further disintegrate Muslims into sects. Terms such as Wahhabism, Shi'ism, Salafism, and the term new Kharijites, these attributes and many more others are re-coined and values attached to further instigate violence amongst people of the same faith. It is interesting to note that those groups called such names may not necessarily call themselves so. In fact, some of these groups have been created by the West or their proxies in the Muslim world[13]

al-wasatiyyah is an Islamic concept and Muslims should not allow others to decide for them who is or who is not moderate.

Finally, instilling the concept of wasatiyyah as exposed in a gradual manner, developing the virtues of humility, self-criticism and seeing unity in diversity is the proper step to solving Middle Eastern crises and by extension the world reciprocal extremism. In order to realize this, Muslims have to be proactive and ready to develop their own project of

economic and political independence. The point of start is to boost economic and intellectual cooperation between the Sunnah and Shi’ah and particularly. And to realize that, two countries are central: Turkey under the present government and Iran[14]

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[1] The Holy Qur’an, Surah 2: al-Baqarah 143

[2] Chapter on “al-Iqtisaad fil-‘Ibaadah”, the book of Riyah al-Saalihin, Abdullah M. Darwish ed. (Beirut: Muassasah Rayyan) p. 98

[3] For more on Modernity and post-modernity, see al-Said Yasin , introduction to al-Hadatah wa ma ba’da al-Hadaathah; (World Islamic Call Society, 1998) p.7. Also see, Suha Ozkan, “ Modern and Anti-Moderns a critical look” in Islam and the Challenges of Modernity, Sharifah al-Shifa ed (KL: ISTAC, 1994) p211

[4] Secularism is philosophical program whose main aims are: de-spiritualization of nature, separation between religion and state and relativity of values. In a nutshell, it means life

without religion. For more information about secularism, see al-Attas, Islam and Secularism, (KL: Art Printing work, 1978) and Tarik Jan et al, Pakistan Between Secularism and Islam , (Islm Abad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1998)

[5] It is interesting to note that like the word wasat and its derivatives, the word taraf opposite of wasat has also occurred five times in the Qur'an: in Surahs, 3: 127, 11: 114, 20: 130, 13: 41 and 21: 44

[6] The best example for this is the so-called worst terrorist group al-Qaidah. The seed of al-Qaidah was sown by the same West when the Afghan were fighting the Soviets.

[7] Countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia are examples of moderate countries and countries such Iran and Syria and extremist countries

[8] While eastern Christianity remained sympathetic with Islam Western Christianity was antagonistic. See books of seerah (biography of the Prophet) and read the response from kings and Emperors of both sides to the letters of the Prophet when he invited them to Islam and peace.

[9] Through the control of the secret of money, diamond, universities, and especially the media

[10] This form of Arab nationalism is reflected in the poem of one Arab nationalist who said:

Welcome to kufr (atheism) as long as it unites us (Arabs) and then let us all go to Hell Fire

[11] Such Dick Cheney, Paul Worlfwoth, and Donald Ramsfeild

[12] See “An American Foreign Policy: the Meridian House Doctrine” in Towards A Positive Islamic World View, Abdul Monir Yaacob, ed (Malaysia, IKIM: 1994) p.1

-[13] Al-Qaidah is the best example of such creation and support by America. A report in al Jazeerah few months a go, shows that a small group called al-Qaidah in East Africa is the creation of the Algerian intelligence to crush the Islamic opposition.

[14] This is not to say that other countries are not instrumental. The problem is that many of those other countries are still undecided.