Moderation in Islam: 
A Conceptual Analysis of Wasatiyyah

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Abstract:
What a Muslim would and should mean by “moderation” is what is signified by the term wasatiyyah, which is derived from the Qur'anic phrase ummah wasat. This term is very significant because it outlines clearly from the very beginning the essential character of the Muslim nation (ummah), and defines their role and duty towards the mankind as a whole. In this paper, we shall attempt to analyse the meaning of the term according to the Qur'ān, and show that what is generally understood as moderation in contemporary discourse is not what is meant by wasatiyyah according to the Qur'ān.

Keywords:
Wasatiyyah, moderation, justice, knowledge, extremism.

Introduction

In English the word “moderation” means “the avoidance of excess or extremes, especially in one’s behaviour or political

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opinions.” The adjective “moderate” means “average in amount, intensity, quality, or degree.” Moderation is always considered an excellent, praiseworthy quality. The phrase “moderation in all things” is a recent formulation of the old idea that “there is measure in all things.” The essential thought can be found in the work of the Greek poet Hesiod (c. 700 B.C.), “observe due measure; moderation is best in all things,” and of the Roman comic dramatist Plautus (c. 250–184 B.C.), “moderation in all things is the best policy.”

Having in mind the concept of “due measure”—i.e. the limit to be observed in every conduct for it to be deemed moderate—one must ask the following basic questions:

1. what is the nature of the limit that is supposed to govern human life?
2. how would one know about those limits? and,
3. why more than often those limits are not known or (even if they are known) not observed?

As such, the question of “what” and “whose” measure becomes relevant in our assessment of the correctness or otherwise of the usage of the term. What or whose measure, for example, is

used by Lord Byron (d. 1824), an English poet and a leading figure in Romanticism, when he says: “America is a model of force and freedom and moderation—with all the coarseness and rudeness of its people”?5

Can we accept the meaning and connotations of moderation in reference to the Muslims in the following examples?:

1. . . . moderate Islamist is one who does not use violence but works within the existing political system.6

2. Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini was highly critical, even condemnatory of the West, often at odds with the international community, and regarded as a radical terrorist state, while Pakistan under the Islamically-oriented Zia ul-Haq was a close ally of the United States, had relations with the West and the international community, and was generally regarded as moderate.7

3. Some thinkers associated with the wasatiyyah (moderate) trend have argued that the historical institution of dhimmi is no longer a suitable basis for citizenship and that non-Muslims should enjoy all the rights and duties of Muslims in contemporary society.8

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4. Militant Muslims see the *moderates* and enlightened as assaulting Islam itself rather than seeking its reform.⁹

Taking cue from the Qurʾān, what a Muslim would and should mean by “moderation” is what is signified by the term *wasātiyyah*, which is derived from the Qurʾānic phrase *ummah wasat*.¹⁰ This term is very significant because it is a title given by God Himself to Muslims, and it outlines clearly from the very beginning the essential character of the Muslim nation (*ummah*), and defines their role and duty towards mankind as a whole. In what follows we shall attempt to analyse the meaning of the term according to the Qurʾān.

**Wasātiyyah according to the Qurʾān**

The phrase *ummah wasat*—from which *wasātiyyah* is derived—is mentioned in the following verses:

The foolish of the people will say: What has turned them from the qiblah which they formerly observed? Say: Unto Allah belong the East and the West. He guides whom He will unto a straight path. Thus We have appointed you a moderate nation (*ummatan wasatan*), that ye may be witnesses (*shuhada*) against mankind and that the messenger may be a witness (*shahid*) against you. And we appointed the qiblah which ye formerly observed only that We might know him who follows the messenger, from whom who turn from his heels. In truth it was a hard (test) save for those whom Allah guided. But it was not Allah’s purpose that your faith should be in vain, for Allah is full of pity, Merciful toward mankind.¹¹


¹¹. Ibid..
These verses are about the controversy surrounding the change of qiblah issue. In the beginning, Muslims were commanded to pray facing the Bayt al-Maqdis. After sixteen or seventeen months of the Prophet’s migration (hijrah) to Madinah, the Muslims were then commanded to pray facing the Ka’bah in Makkah.

The command had been well accepted by the Prophet and his companions as a plain and clear command from God, but it had been contested and ridiculed by the Jews, the polytheists and the hypocrites. Although the apparent issue is about the change of qiblah, the real underlying problem is about the Prophethood (nubuwwah) of Muhammad. With the coming of Muhammad, everybody is obliged to make up his mind about his truthfulness or otherwise based on available evidence. There is no middle position regarding this matter—i.e. Muhammad is either the Messenger of God or he is simply a liar. To affirm him as the messenger of God is tasdiq (to assert his truthfulness) and to deny it means to say that he is a liar (takdhib). It takes knowledge and sincerity to tell the difference, and courage to act upon it. Those who know the truth, speak it out and act upon it are the true believers (known as the muslimūn/mu’mīnūn); those who refuse to acknowledge the truth despite knowing it are the rebels (the kāfīrūn); while those who speak and act contrary to what they truly believe are the hypocrites (the muntīfiqīn).

Upon the shoulders of the true believers is the duty of witnessing (shahādah)—in this life and in the next. Here, since they know the truth, they have the responsibility to preserve and protect it from all forms of corruption. In the next life,

12. For a discussion about the possibility of prophethood as supported by miracles, see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606 A.H.), al-Maṭālib al-‘A’liyah min al-Iḥrār al-‘Ilāhī, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1999/1420), 8: 3–58. However, stronger argument for the truthfulness of a prophet, according to al-Rāzī, is his ability to bring positive change to mankind. See ibid., 8: 59ff.
they shall testify on behalf of the prophets againsts their own people who had denied and falsified the truth. This is the essential character of the Muslim community, and they had known their place among the nations, as well as their duties and responsibilities towards mankind from the very beginning.

Moderation is the essential quality of a reliable witness, whose testimony can be accepted in the court of law. That is how the Qur’an describes the believers. The unbelievers, on the other hand, are called “the fools” (al-sufahā’), which means that they are not moderate, and that their testimony cannot be accepted. “The fools” in the verse cited above are the exact opposite of “the witnesses.”

The word al-safih (pl. al-sufahā’) literally means foolish, stupid, silly, an incompetent person (according to the law), impudent, shameless and insolent. Generally, al-safih means the ignorant (al-jāhil), who is weak intellectually (al-da’īf al-‘aql), and therefore is not well informed of what is beneficial and what is harmful, either in worldly or religious matters. It includes the innocent kind of stupidity like one is who is not capable of looking after one’s own property and well-being. For such people, guardianship (walāyah) is necessary in order to protect their interests. Al-safih also means a wicked person (al-fāsiq), who lacks in terms of knowledge and religion, also a liar (kadhdhāb) who is used to saying things contrary to what he knows, and an obstinate person who refuses to listen to the truth.
In the Qur'an, we shall find the word *s-f-h* and its derivatives being mentioned several times. On one occasion, it is cited in reference to those who had deviated from the religion of Ibrāhīm: “And who forsaketh the religion of Ibrāhīm save him who befooleth himself (man safiha nafsahu)?” In another instance, it is used to refer to those who are incompetent before the law: “But if he who oweth the debt is of low understanding (safihan), or weak, or unable himself to dictate, then let the guardian of his interests dictate in (terms of) equity.”¹⁷ It is again mentioned in relation to the ignorant and misguided: “They are losers who besottedly have slain their children without knowledge (alladhīna qatalū awlādahum safāhan bi-ghayr ‘ilmin), and have forbidden that which Allāh bestowed upon them, inventing a lie against Allāh. They indeed have gone astray and are not guided.”¹⁸

The word *al-safih*, according to Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī, is used in Arabic to refer to a person who is quick in making slanderous accusation of others (*ṣarrī al-ta‘n*); who would use foul and obscene language (*badhi‘ al-lisan*); and who has low intelligence (*qillat al-‘aql*), like a drunk (e.g., the hadith that states: *shārib al-khamr safīh*).¹⁹ The hypocrites, according to the Qur’an, used to call the Prophet and his followers *al-sufahā* because they believed that Islam was a false religion, suitable only for fools.²⁰ Yet God had instead returned the insult to them, calling them the real *al-sufahā*. That is justified based on the following reasons:

1. they refused to listen to the proof of an argument yet called the person who accepted it a fool;

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2. they exchanged the reward of the hereafter with that of the world; and

3. they opposed Muḥammad—and were actually, by doing so—opposing Allah.\(^{21}\)

A fool does not know the difference between right and responsibility and is inclined towards what is harmful instead of what is beneficial to his self. That is undoubtedly true of one who makes silly mistakes regarding worldly matters and even more so if the mistake involves religious matter. Hence, al-Rāzī concludes, the word *al-safih* is appropriate to refer to all unbelievers, whoever they are.\(^{22}\)

In view of the circumstances, the attitude of the Muslims towards them is like that of a guardian (*wāli*) towards the person under his guardianship (*mawlā ‘alayhi*). The *sufahā* according to the Qur’ān are incompetent before the law, and thus are in need of a guardian to take care of their well-being. By the same token, the unbelievers—who are also *sufahā*—are incompetent in religious matters; they need to be corrected and guided by the Muslims who are themselves correct and guided in religious matter. This is the general attitude of the Muslims towards the non-Muslims.

We shall now try to explain the meaning of *ummatan wasāṭen*. The word “*ummah*” according to Ibn Fāris (d. 395 A.H.), is from “*umm*” and it signifies four meanings which are close to each other: “the origin” (*al-āsl*), “the point of reference” (*al-marji‘*), “the group” (*al-jama‘ah*), and “religion” (*al-din*).\(^{23}\) Originally, the word *wasat* refers to the middle point between two opposing sides, then it is used allegorically to

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\(^{21}\) See the commentary of *al-Baqarah* (2): 13 and 308 in al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*.


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refer to the praiseworthy character traits situated in between two extremes—excess and deficiency—like generosity (al-
jūd), which is between extravagance (al-īsrāf) and stinginess
(al-bukhl); and courage (al-shajā‘ah), which is between
foolhardiness (al-tahawwur) and cowardice (al-jubn). Then, it is
used to refer to the person possessing those traits. 24 When the
Muslims are called ummatan wasaṭan it means they are “the best
nation” (khayr ummah), “the most excellent in virtue” (afḍā‘ī),
and that their religion (Islām) is the moderate religion, i.e.
the best of all religions. 25 “The Moderate Nation” (ummatan
wasaṭan) basically refers to “the true Muslims,” exemplified
above by their obedience (in the sense of true submission)
to Muhammad—they turned towards the Ka‘bah without
hesitation in the middle of the prayer following the action of
the Prophet. This does not mean that every member of the
Muslim community will act similarly; but rather, there are those
who will do so in every generation of the Muslim community.

The word “wasaṭ” in the verse cited above, according to
the Prophet, means “just” (‘adl). 26 This is the basic
meaning of wasaṭ, and this meaning is obviously connected to
“knowledge,” and “the act of witnessing” which can only be
expected of those who have knowledge. Justice presupposes
the presence of knowledge and freedom (ikhtiyyār) in the agent

Fāris, Mu‘jam, s.v. “wasaṭ.” For details on the literal meaning of wasaṭ,
its usage in the Qur’an and Sunnah, and the meaning of its opposites,
see Muhammad Bā Karīm Muḥammad Bā ‘Abd Allāh, Wasaṭiyāyah Ahī
al-Sunnah Bayna al-Firaq (Riyāḍ: Dar al-Ra‘y ī ‘l-Nashr wa al-Tawzī‘,

25. All these meanings are close to each other, and not contradictory. See
al-Rāzī, al-Taṣfīr al-Kabīr.

26. This meaning is recorded in almost all major works of ḥadīth collec-
tion. See, for example, ḥadīth no. 3339, 4487 and 7349 in Ṣaḥīḥ
al-Bukhārī; ḥadīth no. 2961 of Sunan al-Tirmidhī; ḥadīth no. 1598 of al-
Zuhār wa al-Raqā‘īq of Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181 A.H.); ḥadīth no. 11068
of Musnad Ahmad; ḥadīth no. 10939 of Sunan al-Nasā‘ī; and ḥadīth no.
because without knowledge and freedom it is not possible to be just, to choose what is good, to acquire virtue, and to be moderate. Furthermore, in Arabic, witnessing denotes “presence” (ḥudūr), “knowledge” (‘ilm), and the act of informing (i’lām). So when a person testifies before a judge, he should be able to differentiate truth from falsehood and state his position clearly. It is a heavy responsibility, because to be a credible witness means to know and embrace the truth, to have the courage to tell the truth, and to defend it against its enemies among the ignorants, liars and pretenders. A truthful witness should not hide the truth or choose to be indifferent. Indifference is in fact antithetical to moderation because it betrays ignorance, cowardice and insincerity—in short, it is injustice. Justice, on the other hand, demands that what is true and right be consciously promoted and defended, and what is false and wrong be rejected and eliminated.

In Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, the hadith (no. 7349) that explains the meaning of wasat is placed under a heading “... that the Prophet had commanded the Muslims to be with the community, namely the Learned (ahl al-‘ilm).” Here, al-Bukhārī makes it very clear that what is meant by ummah wasat is actually “the Learned” among the Muslims, referred to as tāʾifah min ummati in another hadith of the Prophet when he says: lā tazālū tāʾifah min ummati zāhirin ʿalā al-ḥaqq lā yadurruhum man khadhalahum. So ultimately, what is meant by “the witnesses against mankind” is the Learned, and their

27. Ikhtiyār is not just making a choice between two alternatives but to choose what is good, better, or best among them. To choose what is bad or less good is not freedom because the person is no longer acting as his real and true nature demands. See Syed Muhammad Naquīb al-Attas, Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), 33.
28. Ibn Fāris, Mu’jam, s.v. “sh-h-d.”
continuous presence in every generation is guaranteed by the Prophet in many ḥadıths.  

The Learned (‘ulamā‘) are the heirs of the prophets (al-‘ulamā‘ warathat al-anbiyā‘), and that means they inherit the knowledge and duties of the prophets, and face similar problems and challenges faced by the prophets. The Learned among the followers of Muḥammad are like the Prophets of Bani Isrā‘îl (‘ulamā‘ ummati ka-anbiyā‘ Bani Isrā‘îl). They are referred to in another ḥadīth as “the Just” (‘udūl), and their duties are outlined in the following:

This knowledge will be held in every generation by those who are just [and] they shall protect it against the falsification of the extremists, the fabrication of the deceivers and the misinterpretation of the ignorant (yāhīl lāṭār ishā‘ī min kull khalīfah ‘udūl, yāhīl al-waq‘ā‘ī min kull ‘ulamā‘, yāhīl lāṭār ishā‘ī min kull khalīfah ‘al-‘ulamā‘).
What they basically do is what a witness does—to keep the evidence intact so that it can be presented before the judge upon request. The Learned are the true inheritors and interpreters of the knowledge of Islam. Their duty is to protect it from three forms of threat that could corrupt knowledge, namely:

1. falsification of the text by the extremists (tahrf al-ghalin) to support their doctrines and conducts—this practice undermines the integrity of the text;

2. falsification of the authority by the liars (intihal al-mubtilin)—this practice undermines the integrity of the transmission; and

3. misinterpretation of the meaning by the ignorant (tarwil al-jahilin)—this practice undermines the integrity of valid interpretation.34

These practices constitute a threat to knowledge, and a threat to knowledge is a threat to justice. If it is left unchecked, it will corrupt knowledge, and when knowledge becomes corrupted all sorts of extremism will emerge, and injustice will prevail.35

It is a situation when truth and falsehood can no longer be distinguished—a state of mind called confusion.

Reiteratively, the reason can be seen as to why the People of the Book and the unbelievers in general are called sufaha‘and that their testimony cannot be accepted—it is not possible to

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34. See ‘Ali al-Qari, Minqat, 1: 463.
35. Ahl al-Ki‘ab, however, are notorious for condoning those practices. Their greatest crime is their crime against the revealed truth by concealing, denying and falsifying it. See al-Baqarah (2): 75 and 174, as well as al-Arjaf (7): 177.
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know the truth from them because they have corrupted the evidence at their disposal, making them unreliable witnesses. The rest of mankind, in this regard, are sufahā’ in so far as they accept the testimony of the unreliable witnesses, because it leads them to erroneous and fatal judgement.

The Muslims are moderate in religion in the sense that they are not extreme either in terms of excess or deficiency. They are neither like the Christians who go to the extreme of worshipping Jesus whom they believe is the Son of God, nor are they like the Jews who deny altogether his miraculous birth. They are obliged to observe the limits and not to trespass it, and are frequently reminded by the Qurā’n not to behave like the People of the Book:

O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion (lā taghlū fi dinikum) nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth (al-haqq). The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not “Three.” Cease! (it is) better for you! Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as defender.  

Say: O People of the Scripture! Stress not in your religion other than the truth (lā taghlū fi dinikum ghayra al-haqq), and follow not the vain desires (ahwā’) of folk who erred of old and led many astray, and erred from a plain road.

The problem of extremism, however, remains, including among the Muslims. It will persist as long as mankind persists because it is embedded in the human nature itself. In what follows, we shall attempt to explain the meaning of extremism in order to understand its cause and appreciate its remedy.

Extremism

To be extreme in something (ghalā fi al-amr) means to exceed the limit (jāwaza hadāhu). An extremist is he who has no regard of any limit in his mind, speech or action. However, there are “limits” to be observed in everything. There are many verses of the Qur’ān reminding us to know and observe “the limits of Allah” (hudūd Allāh), and that transgression of those limits betrays disbelief, hypocrisy, ignorance and injustice.

These are the limits of Allah (hudūd Allāh). Transgress them not. For whose transgresses Allah’s limits are wrongdoers.

These are the limits of Allah (hudūd Allāh). He manifests them for people who have knowledge.

The wandering Arabs are hardened in disbelief and hypocrisy, and more likely to be ignorant of the limits (hudūd) which Allah has revealed unto His messenger. And Allah is Knower, Wise.

(Triumphant) are those who turn repentant (to Allah), those who serve (Him), those who praise (Him), those who fast, those who bow down. Those who fall prostrate (in worship), those who enjoin the right and who forbid the wrong and those who keep the limits (ordained) of Allah (hudūd Allāh)—And give glad tidings to believers.

According to Ibn Manzūr ghulūwu is from ghalā, meaning “heavy” or “difficult,” the opposite of “light” or “easy.” The phrase “al-ghulūwu fi al-dīn” means to make religion difficult, and that difficulty will arise only when one trespasses its limit

38. Murtadā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205 A.H.), Tāj al-‘Arūs (Dār al-Hidayah), s.v. "ghulūwu."
39. Āl-Baqarah (2): 229
40. Ibid, 230.
41. Al-Tawbah (9): 97.
42. Ibid, 112.
(jāważu ḥaddahu). The saying of the Prophet: “Iyyākum wa al-
ghuluww fi al-dīn”\(^43\) (do not be extreme in religion) means
“to go overboard” (al-tashaddud fihi) and “beyond the limit”
(muğawazat al-ḥadd).\(^44\) What is meant by the limit here is what
is prescribed by the Religion of Islam, which is easy to be
understood and practised.\(^45\)

Further investigation into the meaning of ghuluww
reveals that among other meanings related to it is a’dā’,
meaning to transmit something (like wickedness or disease)
to others—i.e. they it is no longer confined to its limit. This
is what the People of the Book had done to their religion so
that it had become a mix of truth and falsehood, to the extent
that truth can no longer be recognised. As a result, many had
gone astray for following what was actually the result of the evil
desire instead of knowledge.

In Arabic, the word “al-ḥadd” originally means “al-man’
(the barrier), so “the barrier between two things” (al-ḥadd
bayn al-shay’ayn) is “the difference between the two so that one
does not exceed the other” (al-farq baynahumā li-:"la ya’dadiya
aḥaduhumā ʿalā al-ākhar)\(^46\) and the definition of something is
“that which prevents what is being defined from being mixed
up with something else” (al-ḥadd huwa al-mānī li al-māhdūd min
al-ikhtilāṭ bi-ghayrihi).\(^47\)

Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 792 AH) defines “al-ḥadd”
as “the explanation of the intended meaning [of a word] in
such a way that it includes everything that is meant by it and
excludes that which is not meant by it." This, according to him, is what the scholars mean when they say: "every definition is both inclusive and exclusive." To illustrate, the definition of man—"the rational animal" (hayawan nātiq) is taken. By limiting "man" to living being (hayawan), non-living beings are excluded, and by further limiting it to "thinking/speaking" (nātiq), animals without those abilities are excluded from the definition.

The problem of definition is central in logic, and the reason is obvious—there is an intimate connection between ignorance or misconception (of something) and extremism (one's attitude towards it). In such a matter, the Kharijites are a very good example. The first of the Kharijites, the Muḥakkimah, condemned ‘Ali, Mu‘āwiyyah, their representatives in the arbitration and everybody who agreed with them as kāfir for accepting the authority of human decision (by agreeing to have the dispute settled through arbitration), whereas in reality—the way they understood it—it contradicted the Qur'ānic principle that there was no decision but God's. The outcome of this erroneous understanding was fatal, as described by Malati in the following:

Those Muḥakkimah used to go out with their swords to the market-places. And when the innocent people gathered together without being aware of it, they suddenly cried out "la ḥukm illsa illā lillāh!" and lifted up their swords against anybody they happened to overtake, and they went on killing people until they themselves were killed.

49. Referring to al-Mā‘īdah (5): 44.
Takfir means to consider someone’s life and property as permissible (ḥalāl—no longer protected by the religion) and to safely declare that in the hereafter he will be eternally in the Fire. Free practice of takfir is not to be taken lightly. By the time of al-Ghazālī (d. 505 A.H.), the free practice of takfir and counter-takfir had become so widespread forcing him to write a book entitled Rāy al-Tafriqah bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqah just to deal with the problem.51

The root of the problem, as al-Ghazali saw it, is the problem of definition (i.e. the definition of īmān and kufr) because naturally every theoretical judgement will be followed by certain practical (i.e. moral, social and political) implications. We have seen how disastrous the consequence was when the meaning of īmān and kufr had been wrongly conceived.52

Conclusion

One should not fail to note here that in Arabic, the prohibition not to trespass the limit “lā taʿādū” (do not trespass), the words “ʿudwān/ādāwah” (enmity) and “adāwah” (enemy) are from the same root. Note also that the words “iʿtiddā,” “ṭaʿaddīn” and “udwān” are synonymous with “zulm” (injustice). All these point to the fact that extremism, injustice and enmity are interrelated in the sense that the cause of enmity is any act that trespasses the limit (ḥadd), proportion (qadr) and right/truth (ḥaqiq). Having that in mind, nobody can deny the fact the true remedy for the problem of extremism is proper education.

51. Published together with his other works in Majmūʿat Rasāʾil al-Īmām al-Ghazālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1994). His opinions regarding this problem are cited from this work.

52. The problem of tabdīl is of similar nature. If takfir concerns the “truth,” tabdīl concerns the “originality”—the former is about the denial of the truth whereas the latter is about deviation from what is established by the truth.
Education as defined by al-Attas is the inculcation of adab or discipline to the body, mind and soul through “the recognition and acknowledgement of the right and proper place, station, and condition in life and to self discipline in positive and willing participation in enacting one’s role in accordance with that recognition and acknowledgement.” Defined as such, education can be understood as a moderating process aimed at producing a moderate nation (ummatan wasaṭṭan).

Since what we mean by moderation is wasatiyyah, there is no moderation outside the fold of Islam. Therefore, the call to gather all moderates of all faiths is rather an absurd call. What should be done instead is to call them to Islam out of compassion (raḥmah). Hence, what is needed is a frank and rigorous dialogue aimed at knowing and upholding the truth, and in order to do that, Muslims must be intellectually prepared and perfected through proper education (ta'dīb). They must first of all know the difference between sufahā' and shuhadā'; otherwise, they would not know the true from false leaders.