

## 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’an, and show that what is generally understood as moderation in contemporary discourse is not what is meant by *wasatiyyah* according to the Qur’an.

### 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.”<sup>1</sup> The adjective “moderate” means “average in amount, intensity, quality, or degree.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup>

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

1. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. “moderation noun,” at <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t140.e0527630> (accessed 20 April 2011).
2. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. “moderate adjective,” at <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t140.e0527590> (accessed 20 April 2011).
3. It is claimed to be a 14th-century proverbial saying. See *A Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, ed. Elizabeth Knowles (Oxford University Press, 2006), s.v. “measure,” at <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t214.e4442> (accessed 20 April 2011).
4. See *A Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, ed. Elizabeth Knowles (Oxford University Press, 2006), s.v. “moderation in all things,” at <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t214.e4620> (accessed 20 April 2011).

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”?<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>
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*.<sup>7</sup>
3. Some thinkers associated with the *wasatīyah* (*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.<sup>8</sup>

5. <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/moderation> (accessed 11 October 2010).

6. William E. Shepard, François Burgat, James Piscatori and Armando Salvatore, “Islamism,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, available in *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* at <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0888> (accessed 20 April 2011).

7. John L. Esposito, Peter Von Sivers, Rüdiger Seesemann, et al., “Islam,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, available in *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* at <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0383> (accessed 20 April 2011).

8. A. Üner Turgay and Michaelle Browers, “Citizenship,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, available in *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* at <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0152> (accessed 20 April 2011).

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

Taking cue from the Qurʾān, what a Muslim would and should mean by “moderation” is what is signified by the term *wasatīyyah*, which is derived from the Qurʾānic phrase *ummah wasat*.<sup>10</sup> 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.

### ***Wasatīyyah* according to the Qurʾān**

The phrase *ummah wasat*—from which *wasatīyyah* 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 Allāh 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 (*shuhadāʾ*) against mankind and that the messenger may be a witness (*shahīd*) 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 Allāh guided. But it was not Allāh’s purpose that your faith should be in vain, for Allāh is full of pity, Merciful toward mankind.<sup>11</sup>

9. “Reforming Islam and Islamic Law,” in *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/book/islam-9780195174304/islam-9780195174304-chapter-33> (accessed 20 April 2011).

10. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 142-143.

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 Madīnah, 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 Muḥammad. With the coming of Muḥammad, 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. Muḥammad is either the Messenger of God or he is simply a liar. To affirm him as the messenger of God is *taṣdīq* (to assert his truthfulness) and to deny it means to say that he is a liar (*takdhīb*).<sup>12</sup> 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'minūn*); those who refuse to acknowledge the truth despite knowing it are the rebels (the *kāfirūn*); while those who speak and act contrary to what they truly believe are the hypocrites (the *munāfiqūn*).

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-ʿĀliyah min al-ʿIlm al-Ilāhī*, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 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-ḍa'if al-ʿaql*), and therefore is not well informed of what is beneficial and what is harmful, either in worldly or religious matters.<sup>13</sup> 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,<sup>14</sup> also a liar (*kadhhdhāb*) who is used to saying things contrary to what he knows,<sup>15</sup> and an obstinate person who refuses to listen to the truth.<sup>16</sup>

13. Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 A.H.), *Jāmi' al-Bayān fi Tā'wil al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, 24 vols. (Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000/1412), 1: 293; Abū al-Qāsim al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502 A.H.), *al-Mufradāt fi Gharib al-Qur'ān*, ed. Ṣafwān 'Adnān Dāwūdī (Beirut/Damascus: Dār al-Qalam/Dār al-Shāmiyyah, 1412 A.H.), s.v. "s-f-h."
14. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 450 A.H.), *al-Nukat wa al-ʿUyūn*, ed. al-Sayyid b. 'Abd al-Maḥṣūd, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah), 1: 453.
15. Abū Muḥammad al-Baghawī (d. 510 A.H.), *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Dār Ṭayyibah li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 1997/1417), 8 vols., 1: 67.
16. Abū Ja'far al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321 A.H.), *Sharḥ Mushkal al-āthār*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1994/1415), 16 vols., 12: 342.

In the Qur'ān, 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."<sup>17</sup> 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 safahan bi-ghayr ʿilmin*), and have forbidden that which Allāh bestowed upon them, inventing a lie against Allāh. They indeed have gone astray and are not guided."<sup>18</sup>

The word *al-safih*, according to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, is used in Arabic to refer to a person who is quick in making slanderous accusation of others (*sarīʿ al-ṭaʿn*); who would use foul and obscene language (*badhīʿ al-lisān*); and who has low intelligence (*qillat al-ʿaql*), like a drunk (e.g., the ḥadīth that states: *shārib al-khamr safih*).<sup>19</sup> The hypocrites, according to the Qur'ān, used to call the Prophet and his followers *al-sufahāʾ* because they believed that Islam was a false religion, suitable only for fools.<sup>20</sup> Yet God had instead returned the insult to them, calling them the real *al-sufahāʾ*. 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;

17. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 282. See also *al-Nisāʾ* (4): 5.

18. *Al-Anʿām* (6): 140. See also *al-Aʿrāf* (7): 155, and *al-Jinn* (72): 4.

19. See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's commentary of *al-Baqarah* (2): 13 in his *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1995/1415).

20. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 13.

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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

In view of the circumstances, the attitude of the Muslims towards them is like that of a guardian (*walī*) 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 wasaṭan*. 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-aṣl*), “the point of reference” (*al-marjī*’), “the group” (*al-jamā’ah*), and “religion” (*al-dīn*).<sup>23</sup> Originally, the word *wasat* refers to the middle point between two opposing sides, then it is used allegorically to

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

22. Al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 4: 79.

23. Abu al-Ḥusayn ibn Fāris (d. 395 A.H.), *Muḥjam Maqāyīs al-Lughah*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1999/1420), s.v. “*ummah*.”



refer to the praiseworthy character traits situated in between two extremes—excess and deficiency—like generosity (*al-jūd*), which is between extravagance (*al-isrāf*) 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.<sup>24</sup> When the Muslims are called *ummatan wasaṭan* it means they are “the best nation” (*khayr ummah*), “the most excellent in virtue” (*afḍal*), and that their religion (*Islām*) is the moderate religion, i.e. the best of all religions.<sup>25</sup> “The Moderate Nation” (*ummatan wasaṭan*) basically refers to “the true Muslims,” exemplified above by their obedience (in the sense of true submission) to Muḥammad—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 “*wasat*” in the verse cited above, according to the Prophet, means “just” (*‘adl*).<sup>26</sup> This is the basic meaning of *wasat*, 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 (*ikhtiyār*) in the agent

24. See al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685 A.H.), *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta‘wīl*. Cf. Ibn Fāris, *Mu‘jam*, s.v. “*wasat*.” For details on the literal meaning of *wasat*, its usage in the Qur’an and Sunnah, and the meaning of its opposites, see Muḥammad Bā Karīm Muḥammad Bā ‘Abd Allāh, *Wasāṭiyyah Ahl al-Sunnah Bayna al-Firaq* (Riyāḍ: Dār al-Rāyah li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī‘, 1994/1415), 15–28.

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

26. This meaning is recorded in almost all major works of ḥadīth collection. 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-Zuhd wa al-Raqā‘iq* of Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181 A.H.); ḥadīth no. 11068 of *Musnad Aḥmad*; ḥadīth no. 10939 of *Sunan al-Nasā‘ī*; and ḥadīth no. 464 of *al-Asmā‘ wa al-Ṣifāt of al-Bayhaqī*.

because without knowledge and freedom it is not possible to be just, to choose what is good, to acquire virtue, and to be moderate.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in Arabic, witnessing denotes “presence” (*ḥuḍūr*), “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.<sup>28</sup> 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 ḥadīth (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 *ṭā’ifah min ummatī* in another ḥadīth of the Prophet when he says: *lā tazālu ṭā’ifah min ummatī zāhirīn ‘alā al-ḥaqq lā yaḍurruhum man khadhalahum*.<sup>29</sup> 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 Naquib 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.*”

29. Al-Bukhārī, *Khalq Af‘āl al-‘Ibād*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Umayrah (Riyāḍ: Dār al-Ma‘ārif al-Su‘ūdiyyah), 60.

continuous presence in every generation is guaranteed by the Prophet in many ḥadīths.<sup>30</sup>

The Learned (*‘ulamā’*) are the heirs of the prophets (*al-‘ulamā’ warathat al-anbiyā’*),<sup>31</sup> 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 Banī Isrā’īl (*‘ulamā’ ummatī ka-anbiyā’ Banī Isrā’īl*).<sup>32</sup> 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 (*yahmil hādha al-‘ilm min kull khalaf ‘udūluhu yanfūna ‘anhu tahrif al-ghālīn wa-intihāl al-mubtīlīn wa-ta’wīl al-jāhilīn*).<sup>33</sup>

30. See, for example, Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (saying no. 3640), Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (saying no. 247), Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan* (saying no. 2484), Tirmidhī, *Sunan* (saying no. 2192), Ibn Mājah, *Sunan* (saying no. 6), and Aḥmad, *Musnad* (saying no. 14720).
31. Ibn Mājah, *Sunan* (saying no. 223), Ibn Ḥibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (saying no. 88), al-Ṭabarānī, *Musnad al-Shāmiyyīn* (saying no. 1231), al-Bayhaqī, *al-Ādāb* (saying no. 862) and *al-Sunan al-Kubrā* (saying no. 347).
32. Ḥadīth mentioned by ‘Alī b. Sulṭān al-Qārī’s (d. 1014 A.H.) in his *Mirqāt al-Mafātīḥ Sharḥ Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2001), in “*Bāb Haram al-Madīnah*,” vol. 5, p. 1874, and in “*Bāb Manāqib Alī bin Abī Ṭālib*,” vol. 9, p. 3932.
33. Ḥadīth narrated by al-Bayhaqī. See saying no. 248 in Muḥammad b. ‘Abdillāh al-Khaṭīb al-Tibrīzī (d. 741 A.H.), *Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ*, ed. Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, 3 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1985); also saying no. 1 and 2 in Abū ‘Abdillīh Muḥammad b. Waḍḍāḥ al-Qurṭubī (d. 286 A.H.), *al-Bida’ wa al-Nahy ‘Anḥā* (Cairo: Maktabah Ibn Taymiyyah, 1416 A.H.); saying no. 3884 in Abū Ja’far al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321 A.H.), *Sharḥ Mushkal al-Āthār*, ed. Shu‘aib al-Arna‘ūt, 16 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1994/1415); saying no. 599 in Abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān bin Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360 A.H.), *Musnad al-Shāmiyyīn*, ed. Ḥamdī b. ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Salafī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assat al-Risālah, 1984/1405); saying no. 33 in Abū ‘Abdillāh ibn Baṭṭah al-‘Akbarī (d. 387 A.H.), *al-Ibānah al-Kubrā*, ed. Riḍā Mu‘ṭī, ‘Uthmān al-Athayūnī and Yūsuf al-Wābil, 9 vols. (Riyād: Dār al-Rāyah li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī‘, 1988/1409); and saying no. 899 in Abū al-Qāsim Tamām b. Muḥammad al-Rāzī

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 (*tahrīf al-ghālīn*) to support their doctrines and conducts—this practice undermines the integrity of the text;
2. falsification of the authority by the liars (*intiḥāl al-mubṭilīn*)—this practice undermines the integrity of the transmission; and
3. misinterpretation of the meaning by the ignorant (*taʿwīl al-jāhilīn*)—this practice undermines the integrity of valid interpretation.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> 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 *sufahāʾ* and that their testimony cannot be accepted—it is not possible to

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al-Dimashqī (d. 414 A.H.), *al-Fawāʾid*, ed. Ḥamdī b. ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Salafī, 2 vols. (Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1412 A.H.).

34. See ʿAlī al-Qārī, *Mirqāt*, 1: 463.

35. *Ahl al-Kitāb*, 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-Aʿrāf* (7): 177.

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 dīnikum*) nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth (*al-ḥaqq*). 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.<sup>36</sup>

Say: O People of the Scripture! Stress not in your religion other than the truth (*lā taghlū fi dīnikum ghayra al-ḥaqq*), and follow not the vain desires (*ahwā'*) of folk who erred of old and led many astray, and erred from a plain road.<sup>37</sup>

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.

36. *Al-Nisā'* (4): 171.

37. *Al-Mā'idah* (5): 77.

## Extremism

To be extreme in something (*ghalā fi al-amr*) means to exceed the limit (*jāwaza ḥaddahu*).<sup>38</sup> 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” (*ḥudūd Allāh*), and that transgression of those limits betrays disbelief, hypocrisy, ignorance and injustice.

These are the limits of Allah (*ḥudūd Allāh*). Transgress them not. For whoso transgresses Allah’s limits are wrongdoers.<sup>39</sup>

These are the limits of Allah (*ḥudūd Allāh*). He manifests them for people who have knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

The wandering Arabs are hardened in disbelief and hypocrisy, and more likely to be ignorant of the limits (*ḥudūd*) which Allah has revealed unto His messenger. And Allah is Knower, Wise.<sup>41</sup>

(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 (*ḥudūd Allāh*)—And give glad tidings to believers.<sup>42</sup>

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

38. Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205 A.H.), *Tāj al-‘Arūs* (Dār al-Hidāyah), s.v. “*ghuluww*.”

39. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 229

40. Ibid, 230.

41. *Al-Tawbah* (9): 97.

42. Ibid, 112.

(*jāwaza ḥaddahu*). The saying of the Prophet: “*Iyyākum wa al-ghuluww fi al-dīn*”<sup>43</sup> (do not be extreme in religion) means “to go overboard” (*al-tashaddud fihi*) and “beyond the limit” (*mujāwazat al-ḥadd*).<sup>44</sup> What is meant by the limit here is what is prescribed by the Religion of Islam, which is easy to be understood and practised.<sup>45</sup>

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-allā ya‘tadiya aḥaduhumā ‘alā al-ākhar*)<sup>46</sup> and the definition of something is “that which prevents what is being defined from being mixed up with something else” (*al-ḥadd huwa al-māni‘ li al-mahdūd min al-ikhtilāf bi-ghayrihi*).<sup>47</sup>

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

43. Ibn Mājah, *Sunan* (saying no. 3029); Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Muṣannaf* (saying no. 13909).

44. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1990), 15: 131–134.

45. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 185.

46. Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Duraid al-Azdī (d. 321 A.H.), *Jamharat al-Lughah*, ed. Ramzī Munīr Ba‘albakkī, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm, 1987), s.v. “*ḥadd*.”

47. Abū Hilāl al-Ḥasan b. ‘Abdillāh al-‘Askarī (d. c. 395 A.H.), *al-Furūq al-Lughawiyah*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Salīm (Cairo: Dār al-‘Ilm wa al-Thaqāfah), 32.

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.”<sup>48</sup> To illustrate, the definition of man—“the rational animal” (*hayawān nāṭiq*) is taken. By limiting “man” to living being (*hayawān*), non-living beings are excluded, and by further limiting it to “thinking/speaking” (*nāṭiq*), 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 ‘Alī, Mu‘āwiyah, 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.<sup>49</sup> The outcome of this erroneous understanding was fatal, as described by Malaṭi 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 “*lā ḥukm illā lillāh!*” and lifted up their swords against anybody they happened to overtake, and they went on killing people until they themselves were killed.<sup>50</sup>

48. Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, *Risālat al-Hudūd* (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmī), 7.

49. Referring to *al-Mā’idah* (5): 44.

50. From Malaṭi’s *al-Tanbih wa al-Radd ‘alā Ahl al-Ahwā’ wa al-Bida’*, quoted by Toshihiko Izutsu in his *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology: A Semantic Analysis of Iman and Islam* (Petaling Jaya: Islamic Book Trust, 2006; originally published by Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, Keio University, 1965), 7–8.



*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 *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqah* just to deal with the problem.<sup>51</sup>

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.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

One should not fail to note here that in Arabic, the prohibition not to trespass the limit "*lā ta'tadū*" (do not trespass), the words "*udwān/adāwah*" (enmity) and "*aduww*" (enemy) are from the same root. Note also that the words "*i'tidā*," "*ta'addin*" and "*udwān*" are synonymous with "*zulm*" (injustice). All these point to the fact that extremism, injustice and enmity are inter-related in the sense that the cause of enmity is any act that trespasses the limit (*ḥadd*), proportion (*qadr*) and right/truth (*ḥaqq*). 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 *Majmū'at Rasā'il al-Imām al-Ghazālī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al'Ilmiyyah, 1994). His opinions regarding this problem are cited from this work.

52. The problem of *tabdī'* is of similar nature. If *takfir* concerns the "truth," *tabdī'* 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.”<sup>53</sup> Defined as such, education can be understood as a moderating process aimed at producing a moderate nation (*ummatan wasaṭan*).

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 (*rahmah*). 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’dib*). They must first of all know the difference between *sufahā’* and *shuhadā’*; otherwise, they would not know the true from false leaders.

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53. See Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978; repr., Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 105–106.