

## *Al-Wasatīyyah* (Moderation): The Alternative Epistemology for the 21st Century Muslim Crises

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### **Abstract**

The 21st century Muslim world faces the crises of reciprocal extremism and radicalisation entertained by minorities in our midst and rooted in the Middle Eastern mindset of Zionism and Arab nationalism. Its outward manifestations are: (a) continuous bloodshed in the Muslim lands, and (b) deepening Muslim disunity. This article examines the Qur'anic concept of *wasat* as an inward alternative of the mindset of extremism and a means of deradicalisation. *Al-wasatīyyah* is discussed within the framework of the Islamic epistemology of gradual sustenance as a method of its implementation. The article critically examines the term "*al-wasatīyyah*," traces the Qur'anic injunctions that make up its framework and applies its values to the 21st century "crises."

### **Keywords**

*Al-wasatīyyah*, epistemology, knowledge, extremism, excess, negligence, westernisation of Christianity.

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## Introduction

In *sūrah al-Baqarah*, Allāh declares:

And so it is that we have now appointed you Muslims the Chosen Community for the midmost way (*ummatan wasaṭan*) to stand as witnesses over mankind and for the messenger be a witness before all of you.<sup>1</sup>

In the commentaries of both al-Sa‘adī and al-Zamakhsharī, *ummatan wasaṭan* is interpreted as the chosen and the just community respectively.<sup>2</sup> In *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Sayyidah ‘Ā’ishah is reported to have narrated that upon entering her house once, the Prophet found a lady whom he asked about:

“Who is she?,” to which Sayyidah ‘Ā’ishah replied, “She is Miss X, who is performing some of her prayers.” The Prophet, thus, said: “Slow down, act according to your ability. I swear that Allāh will never get bored (of rewarding you) until you get bored (of worshipping),”<sup>3</sup> and the best form of worship to the Prophet was that which the servant can sustain.

The root of the world crises today is neither economic, cultural nor even social but the corruption of knowledge. Foods are available more than the world population can consume and yet, starvation is getting increasingly worrying. Families are expanding and means of communication are becoming more accessible, yet relationships are getting

1. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 143. See Aḥmad Zāki Hammād, *The Glorious Qur’ān, A Modern Phrased Interpretation in English, Arabic English Parallel*, 3d print (2009).
2. ‘Abdurrahmān b. Nāṣir Al-Sa‘adī, *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Raḥmān fī Tafsīr Kalām al-Raḥmān*, vol. 1 (Al-Dammām: Dār Al-Dhakhā’ir, 1994), 105. Also see al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol.1 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth, 2001), 224.
3. Chapter on “Al-Iqtīṣād fī al-‘Ibādah,” in *The Book of Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, ed. ‘Abdullāh M. Darwish (Beirut: Muassasah Rayyān, n.d.), 98.

more strained. Disciplines in medicine and medical treatment are getting more diversified and more specialised, yet, diseases are becoming more incurable. In the far past, man used to live in primitive jungles and was said to be less enlightened and less civilised, yet man was less harmful because he was regulated by the laws of *fiṭrah* (the straight path) often referred to as primitive law. Today, science and technology are more advanced, pacts and treaties in the likes of the United Nations are often ratified, man is claimed to be more enlightened, yet we are still living in 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. Indeed, the root cause for all these is the corruption of knowledge.

The 21st century Muslim World does not live in isolation from this reality. A short account of history will explain this. The pre-Islamic worldview was that of ignorance (*jāhiliyyah*), reflected in the culture of tribalism, absence of guided rationalism, and the dominance of a materialistic concept of God.<sup>4</sup> The pre-Islamic epistemology was described by the Qurʾān as: “They know only the outside appearance of the life of the world and they are heedless of the Hereafter.”<sup>5</sup> This verse, if read in relation to *Al-Ankabūt* (29): 63,<sup>6</sup> and *Luqmān* (31): 25,<sup>7</sup> is indicative of the corruption of not only knowledge in its sense of discovering new ideas, but also in its processes and channels.

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4. As indicated in *Al-Zumar* (39): 3: “We worship them only that they may bring us near to Allāh.”
  5. *Al-Rūm* (30): 7.
  6. “If you were to ask them: ‘Who sends down water and give life therewith to the earth after its death?’ They will surely reply: ‘Allāh!’ Say: ‘All the praise and thanks be to Allāh!’ Nay! Most of them have no sense.”
  7. “If you were to ask them: ‘Who it is that created the heavens and the earth?’ They will certainly say, ‘Allāh!’ Say: ‘Praise be to Allāh!’ But most of them know not.”

This was replaced with a new theory of knowledge by the Prophet in two phases: in Mecca and Medina through: a) the inculcation of a *tawḥīd* mindset, and b) the exercise of *‘izzah*, that is, Islamic sovereignty, respectively. During this time, Muslims observed a living *Shari‘ah* in the example of the Prophet. The objectives of the *Shari‘ah* as enshrined in such works like *al-Muwafaqāt* by Imām al-Shāṭibī<sup>8</sup> had been attached to the *al-wasatiyyah* approach guided by the Islamic worldview.

However, with the advent of colonialism, beginning from the attacks of the crusaders, especially from 1798 when Napoleon landed in Egypt, the Eastern consciousness and discourse was adversely impacted.<sup>9</sup> Then, with the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, the Muslim world became totally absorbed in an epistemology purely materialistic and totally foreign to Islam.

Notedly at this juncture, moderation is extremely difficult to operate in an environment of reciprocal extremisms. Similar to the laws of physics, any extreme social action is followed by an opposite extreme social reaction. Post-modernity<sup>10</sup> has both its relevance and good values. However, its crises seem to have overshadowed such values. Before the split of atoms, modernity went to the extreme of its denial of religious values, and by so doing, it sowed the seed of secular materialism<sup>11</sup> (an

8. Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Muwafaqāt fi Uṣūl al-Shari‘ah*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dārul Fikr al-‘Arabī, n.d.).

9. Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islām, Holy War and Unholy Terror* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 41 and 47.

10. For more on Modernity and Post-Modernity, see al-Sa‘īd Yāsīn’s introduction to *Al-Ḥadāthah wa mā ba‘da al-Ḥadāthah* (n.p.: World Islamic Call Society, 1998), 7. Also see Suha Ozkan, “Modern and Anti-Moderns: a Critical Look” in *Islām and the Challenges of Modernity*, ed. Shari-fah al-Shifā (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1994), 211.

11. Secularism is a philosophical programme whose main aims are: de-spiritualisation of nature, separation between religion and state, and relativisation of values. In a nutshell, it means life without religion. For more information about secularism, see Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978); and Tārik Jan et al., *Pakistan between Secularism and Islam* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1998).

extreme form of atheism). Extremism begets extremism, and unfortunately, such a form of secular extremism has been the world dominant philosophy for centuries and has eventually begotten a strong opposite form of religious extremism. Examples of extreme actions can be seen in a trend of unnecessary provocation since the publication of Salman Rushdi's *Satanic Verses*.<sup>12</sup>

After the split of atoms and the birth of post-modernity, the mindset of de-constructionism<sup>13</sup> 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. This new paradigm has added to the crises of the 21st century, which has manifested itself in the following phenomena:

First, with the coming of the unipolar system upon the collapse of the Soviet Union,<sup>14</sup> and the coming into power of the Neo-Conservatives in the United States, an extremely paranoid and hysterical world behaviour emerged. Such a form of extremism is espoused by the advocates of the American

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12. Other examples are the Danish cartoons published in the newspaper, *Jyllands Posten*, 30 September 2005; the announcement by Terry Jones in July 2010 that he would burn 200 copies of the Holy Qur'an in commemoration of the 9/11 attacks, which attracted heavy media coverage; and lastly, the provocative anti-Islamic movie "Innocence of Muslims," which is reported to have been produced by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula by the pseudonym, Sam Bacile, in September 2012.
  13. After the split of atoms, the scientific certainty about what things truly are became questionable due mainly to the fact that determining the properties and qualities of sub-atomic particles had become very difficult. So, de-constructionism is the postmodern mindset that has lost a grasp of reality. For more, see Karam Khamees, "Ma ba'da al-Hadāthah: Nazrah Awwaliyyah," in *Al-Hadāthah wa mā Ba'da al-Hadāthah*, p. 124 note 11.
  14. The political history between the world of Islam and the West is widely believed to have passed through stages: the stage of the Multi-polar system when multiple powers such as Portugal, Great Britain, France, Italy and Germany controlled the world of Islam; the stage of Bipolar system when the power shifted to two main powers: the former Soviet Union and the United States; and the Unipolar system with the sole domination of America after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Empire Dream, such as Dick Cheney,<sup>15</sup> Donald Rumsfeld<sup>16</sup> and Paul Wolfowitz<sup>17</sup> which mainly manifested itself in a series of unjustifiable military invasions and interventions in the heart of the Muslim world in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, the War on Terror orchestrated by this group is radicalising many of our moderate youths.

Second, the emergence of a misguided generation of right-seekers without acknowledging any form of corresponding responsibilities is another problem. In the Gambia educationists are gravely concerned by the school system which is presently being largely crippled by this age of right; and the hopes for creating a reliable future generation of Muslims are constantly and gradually fading away.

Finally, the crises are mostly manifested in Muslim disunity, fragmentation and most dangerously in the state of hopelessness and absence of common strategies to regain the world leadership or even to regain independence during the 21st century.

Thus, “*Al-Wasatīyyah: An Alternative Epistemology*” may simultaneously pose as both interesting, yet confusing. Two reasons could account for this: the first is that both terms are elusive by their nature. The other has to do with their relationship in this context. This article examines the concept of *al-wasatīyyah*, traces the Qur’ānic injunctions that represent a theory of knowledge, and hypothesises that *al-wasatīyyah*, if read within the context of the epistemology proposed in this article, will eliminate reciprocal extremisms between secular and religious forces. We will attempt to define the concept in

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15. Richard Bruce Cheney was born on 30 January 1941. He served as the 46th Vice President of the United States under George Bush from 2001–2009.

16. Donald Henry Rumsfeld was born on 9 July 1932. He served as Secretary of Defense from 2001–2006.

17. Paul Dundes Wolfowitz was born on 22 December 1943. He served as Deputy Secretary of Defense from 2001–2005 and Head of World Bank from 2005–2007.

the context of the current paradigm of international relations and attempt to apply its values to the crises of our present generation.

### ***Al-Wasatiyyah* and Extremism: A Definition**

*Al-Wasatiyyah* can literally be translated as “moderation.” In the Arabic dictionary, *Al-Munjid fi al-Lughah wa al-Ilām*, *wasat* is defined based on two roots: *wasata* and *wasuṭa* of which the present tense is *yasitu*, which means being in the middle and being honourable respectively.<sup>18</sup> However, if an “*al*” is added, *al-wasat*, which is neutral, it connotes moderation.<sup>19</sup> *Ummatan wasatan* is also interpreted to mean “chosen community of the midmost way”<sup>20</sup> and the “community of the middle way.”<sup>21</sup>

Technically, *al-wasatiyyah* and its derivatives are cited five times in the Qurʾān. Although the verses address different contexts, they all allude to the best of that context. In *al-Baqarah* (2): 238, the word refers to the ‘*asr*’ prayer; in *al-Māʾidah* (5): 89, to the best food; in *al-Qalam* (68): 28, to the best companion; in *al-ʿĀdiyāt* (100): 5, to the best type of horse; and in *al-Baqarah* (2): 143, to the best *ummah*. When the last-mentioned verse is read in relation to *Āli ʿImrān* (3): 110 that describes the *ummah* of the Prophet as “the best,” the *al-wasatiyyah* meaning is further strengthened. Notedly, the *Āli ʿImrān* verse demonstrates that being the best, *wasatī*, is a value earned rather than a gift from Allāh through *al-amr bi al-maʿrūf wa nahy ʿan al-munkar* (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is bad). More specifically, moderation is the property of the *Shariʿah* while extremism is a non-Islamic property, and

18. See its 29th ed. (Lebanon: Dār al-Meshriq, 1987), 900.

19. Ibid.

20. See *ibid.*, note 3.

21. Sayyid Abūl Aʿlā Maudūdī, *Towards Understanding the Quran, A Bridged Version of Tafhim al-Qurʾān*, Trans: Zafar Ishaq Ansari (United Kingdom: The Islamic Foundation, n.d.).

Muslims are tasked to maintain moderation by re-orienting those who are inclined to extremism through the mechanism of *al-amr bi al-ma'rūf*.

*Al-wasatiyyah* in the technical sense refers to a state between two extremes—excess and negligence. What makes moderation the best of any context is that it is a state between two blameworthy extremes. Allāh pronounces: “And those who, when they spend are neither extravagant nor niggardly, but hold a medium (way) between those extremes.”<sup>22</sup> The issue of witnessing over mankind as quoted above in the *al-Baqarah* verse is only possible when the one who witnesses has his place in the middle of the events to be able to witness them properly. Thus, 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 *‘ibādāt* or devotional acts, moderation is the ability to worship Allāh between hope (*raghbān*) and fear (*rahabān*).<sup>23</sup> It is also the ability to persist on a limited scale of sincere obedience to Allāh as in the *ḥadīth* quoted above rather than being involved in unlimited scale that cannot be sustained. The *ḥadīth* also addresses our youths and enjoins them to do a little at a time yet consistently and continuously in the fields of education, athleticism, and particularly, *da‘wah*. One of the wisdoms of Ibn ‘Aṭā’illāh is to observe the cosmic law of maturity so that success can be achieved. He says: “Bury your existence in the soil of obscurity. For, the seed that hastily exposes itself will never grow.”<sup>24</sup>

In the field of *mu‘āmalat* with dealings and relationships of the social and intellectual nature, moderation is the ability

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22. *Al-Furqān* (25): 67.

23. Refer to *al-Anbiyā’* (21): 90.

24. As quoted in Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Khuṭab al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī fī Shu‘ūn al-Dīn wa al-Ḥayāt*, ed. Quṭb ‘Abdūl Ḥamīd Quṭb, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dārul I’tisām, n.d.), 36.



to put into operation two seemingly contradictory qualities or realms such as operationalising the requirements of the body and the soul, the tenets of the temporal world (*al-dunyā*) with the requirements of the next world (*al-ākhirah*). Apart from *‘ibādāt* and *mu‘āmalāt*, moderation in the field of intellectual discussions means avoiding both from making generalisations of judgments in speculative issues and imposing a particular viewpoint of a school or a sect as the only available view, and exposing as well as accepting divergence of views with evidences.

Used interchangeably with *al-ḥikmah* (wisdom) or *al-‘adālah* (justice), *al-wasatiyyah* is the ability to harmonise *al-zāhir* (the outward) with *al-bāṭin* (the inward). Towards this end, harmony has to be achieved between the mundane and the spiritual realms. Essentially for this reason, excesses in the commission or the omission of all acts have been curtailed. Islam teaches that man’s success lies neither in asceticism nor materialism, that man should neither shun, or 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, moderation is the ability to see unity in diversity and to accommodate and tolerate divergence of views as long as they do not contravene the fundamentals of faith. Indeed, most of the violent relationships emanate from extremism either between Muslims and non-Muslims on the one hand, and among Islamic sects, on the other. Our intellectual markets are most of the time flooded with books that create and sustain sectarian extremism: the *Sunnī* against the *Shī‘ah*; and within the *Sunnī*, attacks and counter attacks between, for example, supporters and opponents of *al-taṣawwuf*, the Islamic mysticism.

Thus, Yūsūf al-Qaraḍāwī once called the “Governing Principles of Moderation” (*ḍawābiḥ al-wasatiyyah*) as implications of moderation.<sup>25</sup> The principles are:

1. facilitation (*al-taysīr*) in giving formal legal opinion, and giving glad tidings (*al-tabshīr*) in the field of *daʿwah*;
2. combining the principles of upright ancestors (*al-salafiyyah*) with the requirements of renewal (*al-tajdīd*);
3. balancing between the permanent principles of law (*al-thawābit*) and changing conditions of time (*al-mutaghayyirāt*);
4. the coupling of religious duties (*wājib*) with the understanding of social realities (*al-wāqīʿ*);
5. engaging in dialogue (*al-ḥiwār*) and coexistence with other peoples and practicing tolerance (*al-tasāmuh*) with those who differ;
6. adopting the principles of consultation (*al-shūrā*), justice, freedom of peoples (*ḥuriyyāt al-shuʿūb*), and human rights (*ḥuqūq al-Insān*);
7. being just (*inṣāf*) to women, liberating them from the oppression of customs inherited from the eras of backwardness and the oppression of foreign customs coming from the civilisation of disintegration; and,
8. presenting Islam as a balanced, integrated civilisational mission (*risālah ḥadāriyyah*) for the revival, liberation and unification of the *ummah*.<sup>26</sup>

An analytical look into these principles may reclassify them into the following policies and approaches: first, adopting

25. Quoted in a research paper by Muhammad Kamal Hassan, “The Concept of al-Wasatiyyah and the Challenge of Islam Liberal in Indonesia,” at <http://www.iium.edu.my/irie/11/info/Sample-3.pdf>.

26. See *ibid*. Also see al-Qaraḍāwī, in [www.qaradawi.net](http://www.qaradawi.net) on the page *nadwāt wal muʿtamarāt*, during his trip to China.

dialogue with “the other” rather than resorting to violence of any form; second, respecting human dignity and worth, the absence of which has kept the Muslim world in captivity for ages; third, respecting academic freedom; fourth, balancing Islamic injunctions with requirements of the changing realities; fifth, encouraging Muslim creativity and proactivity rather than imitation and re-activism; and finally, mastery of the arts of Islamic propagation. Indeed, non-mastery of this art has caused more harm to the Islamic *da‘wah* than good.

In the introduction, the question of describing *al-wasatiyyah* as an epistemology in the context of this article was raised. This author believes that it can be explained at two levels:

1. That the root cause of our present problem is the corruption of knowledge of which the solution lies in proper epistemology;
2. Unless and until it becomes a mindset, all the behavioural and practical values of moderation outlined above remain ineffective. The best way of securing such values is to link them to the sequence of the Islamic epistemology as will be explained later in this article.

### Definition of Extremism

The definition and importance of moderation is neither complete nor appreciated until “extremism” is comprehensively defined. Currently, due to the pervasive world media, the Arabic word “*al-ta‘arruf*” has been extensively and rampantly used to denote extremism. Although originally and literally Arabic,<sup>27</sup>

27. It is interesting to note that similar to “*wasat*” and its derivatives, the word “*‘araḍ*” which is the antonym of “*wasat*” is also cited five times in the Qur’ān: *Āli ‘Imrān* (3): 127; *Hūd* (11): 114, *Tā-Hā* (20): 130, *al-Ra‘d* (13): 41 and *al-Anbiyā’* (21): 44.

nonetheless, it can be claimed that *taṭarruf* is technically borrowed from the secular Western worldview. Similar to the frequently used “*uṣūli*” by the media, including that of Muslim, as a translation for “fundamentalism,” “*taṭarruf*” is a direct translation of the English word “extremism.” Commonly enough, expressions such as *al-taṭarruf al-Islāmi* (Islamic extremism) or *al-uṣūli*<sup>28</sup> *al-Islāmi* (Islamic fundamentalism) are used with nary a restraint. However, this does not apply to Christian or Jewish extremism of which extremist acts by the Zionist state, ETA in Spain and past Irish terrorism still haunt our memory.

The Western media cunningly coin such terminologies with negative connotations to further play up with the Muslim mind in favour of their national and Western interest. Hence, once a group previously branded as extremist or terrorist turn around to serve the Western interest—even though they may remain using the same weapons—they cease to be branded as such, and the opposite is also the case.<sup>29</sup> By the same token, the term “*jihād*” was acceptable during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, but has now morphed into a heinous act that duly invokes horror during the present Western occupation of Afghanistan. Indeed, this has been committed by none other than the same media, which has classified the Muslim world into moderate and extremist states.<sup>30</sup>

### **Extremism in the Language of the *Shari‘ah***

If *taṭarruf* is technically proven to be a translation from a foreign worldview, the Qur’ānic term, thus, used to denote

28. “*Uṣūl*” is the plural of the Arabic term “*asl*,” and similar to “*taṭarruf*,” which is a translation of “extremism,” “*uṣūli*” is a translation of “fundamentalist.”
29. The best example for this is the so-called terrorist group *al-Qā‘idah*. The seed of *al-Qā‘idah* was sown by the same West when the Afghans were fighting against the Soviet Union.
30. Countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia are examples of moderate countries while the likes of Iran and Syria extremist.

extremism is *al-ghuluww*. It is repeated twice in the Qurʾān as in the following: “O People of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Do not exceed the limits in your religion nor say of Allāh aught but the truth. The Messiah ʿĪsā, son of Maryam, was a messenger of Allāh and His word, which he bestowed on Maryam . . . .”<sup>31</sup> Along the same vein, Allāh warns: “Say (O Muḥammad): 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.”<sup>32</sup> Subsequent to this, the next two verses state the reason for their extremism: “They used not to forbid one another from the *munkar*, sins and polytheism, which they committed.”<sup>33</sup>

In addition to “*ghuluww*,” another word that connotes extremism in the Islamic legacy is “*tashaddud*.” Not only did the *Sharīʿah* define extremism, it also adopted a moderate style in its methodology of enjoining that which is good and forbidding that which is bad. Indeed, this is precisely the mechanism with which to remove *ghuluww* and to maintain *wasatiyyah*. What is more essential in moderation, however, is that the parameters of what is right and wrong are designed by Allāh alone through His Prophet Muḥammad. The people of the Scriptures are invited to this as attested by the verses as follows:

O people of the Scripture! Come to a word that is just between us and you that we worship none but Allāh and that we associate no partners with Him and that none of us shall take others as Lords besides Allāh, then if they turn away say: “Bear witness that we are Muslims.”<sup>34</sup>

31. *Al-Nisāʾ* (4): 171.

32. *Al-Māʾidah* (5): 77.

33. *Ibid.*, 78-79.

34. *Āli ʿImrān* (3): 64.

Then whosoever disputes with you concerning him (‘Isā) 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 Allāh upon those who lie.”<sup>35</sup>

Next, in *sūrah Sabā’*, Allāh pronounces: “Say (O Muḥammad): ‘who gives you provision from the heavens and the earth?’ Say: ‘Allāh,’ and verily we or you are rightly guided or in a plain error.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Application of the Values of Moderation to the 21st Century Crises**

Thus far, three main problems above have been outlined as outward manifestations of the 21st century crises. The application of *Āli ‘Imrān* (3): 64 and 61 as well as *Sabā’* (34): 24 can offer solution to the first and third problems.

On the first problem, the Western Neo-Conservatives’ paranoid and hysteric mindset, which is currently causing havoc in the heart of the Muslim world in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Pakistan as well as threatening to cause more in Iran, can only be tamed by the application of this trend of thought. Thus, extremism begets extremism and central to this hysteric mindset are two extreme processes: (1) Westernisation of Christianity; and (2) Zionisation of the West.

1. The Christianity as was revealed to Jesus Christ was originally an eastern religion. It was born in Palestine for local consumption for a period that would link Jesus to the Prophet Muḥammad. Due to this nature, the Christianity of Jesus Christ did not

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35. *Āli ‘Imrān* (3): 61.

36. *Sabā’* (34): 24.

carry with it the elements of universality. However, three decades after the demise of Jesus, Saint Paul embarked on the Christianisation of the West. Even though the process was supported by Emperor Constantine, the project failed due mainly to the lack of universal elements. Inevitably, the failure led to contrary result. Instead of Christianising the West, Christianity became westernised<sup>37</sup> bearing with it all the elements of Western civilisation, the most dangerous of which was the belief in secular materialism. This situation shifted the original relationship of sympathy and understanding between Islam and Christianity and cloaked it with Western antagonism against Islam. As a result, one can claim that the original relationship of sympathy between Islam and Christianity, as expressed in the Qurʾān in regard to the defeat of the Christian Roman Empire by the Persian Empire,<sup>38</sup> has been hijacked by a greedy minority of extremists through the subsequent process.

2. Had the situation stopped at (1), the relationship could have been easily mended in favour of the *al-wasatiyyah* mindset. Unfortunately, however, this step was followed by another extreme one, which lies in the Zionisation of the West. Zionism is the belief in a promised land belonged by others i.e., Palestinian land which is occupied by a minority of some extremist Jews. Such a powerful minority

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37. While eastern Christianity remained sympathetic to Islam, Western Christianity was antagonistic. See books of *sīrah* (biography of the Prophet) such as Ibn Hishām and Ibn Ishāq and read the response from kings and emperors of both sides to the letters sent to them by the Prophet when he invited them to Islam and peace.

38. In *al-Rūm* (30): 1–4, Allāh says: “*Alif Lām Mīm*. The Romans have been defeated in a neighbouring land; but they would gain victory in a few years . . .”

can only be neutralised through moderation. Any observer of the 21st century world politics will realise 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-à-vis* the Zionist state. With the state of Israel, most of the Western superpowers tend to act meekly like dwarfs most of the time. They have often been embarrassed by the Zionist state that works overtly against all the values like democracy and the rule of law the West has always claimed to cherish, and as such has lost credibility in the eyes of all conscious Muslims.

Next, the third problem being the crisis of Muslim disunity has its roots in an alien epistemology. Interestingly, at this juncture, reciprocal extremism between Jewish nationalism in terms of Zionism, and Arab nationalism in terms of Arabisation of Islam has adversely contributed in consolidating the world reciprocal extremism<sup>39</sup> and in worsening the 21st century Muslim crisis.

By the same token, central in the epistemology of *wasatīyyah* are the values enshrined in the afore-cited *Āli ‘Imrān* and *Sabā’* verses: humbleness, humility, and acceptance of one’s error and self-criticism. Furthermore, the verses underscore the fact that the Prophet, though a perfect man, used an effective *wasatī* method of putting himself on an equal

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39. This form of Arab nationalism is reflected in the poem of Rachid Salim al-Khoury, the Arab nationalist who said: “Welcome to *kufr* (atheism) as long as it unites us (Arabs) and then let us all go to Hell Fire.” He was born in 1887 in Lebanon and worked as a teacher for seven years and later left for Brazil in 1913. He was a well-known Arab nationalistic poet, known as “the villager poet.” He died in 1984. For more information, see [www.onefineart.com/en/artists/rachid\\_salim\\_khoury/](http://www.onefineart.com/en/artists/rachid_salim_khoury/).



scale with his enemies in search for the truth. After the demise of the Prophet, the Companions used the same method, and doctrines were developed in ethics of disagreements. The saying, “My opinion is right but it is probably wrong, and the opinion of my opponent is wrong but probably right,” was reflective of a good methodology used by the upright ancestors in fighting extremism and in sustaining moderation. This had largely led to the intactness of the classical Islamic period and kept Muslim unity, independence and superiority in all fields as well. Today, humility to accept the probability of error or mistake in one’s opinion or the opinion of one’s master is most of the time absent. A large part of why Muslims have lost their unity is the absence of this epistemology.

The age of right as the second problem, was born out of a shift in the Western political history from extreme barbarism as expressed in the preamble of the Charter of the United Nations to extreme individualism at the end of the 20th century. This focus on individual rights without corresponding responsibilities has created a generation of right-seekers in our homes and has largely crippled our schools. This is worsened by the merciless media that constantly bombard us with entertaining information in terms of books, magazines, films and the internet, which generate extremism in our youths most of the time. This makes the Muslim dream of the world leadership or Muslim independence in the 21st century a far-fetched dream.

This particular problem can be tackled through the application of the Islamic epistemology, or the Islamic theory of knowledge, which is traceable in the following Qur’anic verses: “And Allāh taught Ādam the names . . . .”,<sup>40</sup> “Allāh brought you out of your mother’s womb knowing nothing at all and then He gave you hearing and sight and thinking hearts

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40. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 31.

(i.e. faculties to acquire knowledge) . . . .”;<sup>41</sup> “. . . you have been given but little knowledge.”;<sup>42</sup> “My Lord, increase me in knowledge”;<sup>43</sup> “But they have no sure knowledge therein. They follow nothing but mere conjecture and conjecture avails nothing at all against the Truth”;<sup>44</sup> and “So after the Truth, what (is there) but error.”<sup>45</sup> This theory of knowledge has the following elements:

1. It links knowledge to Allāh as its origin; this is important because it eliminates production of technology that is harmful to mankind like weapons of mass destruction (WMDs);
2. It urges individuals and communities to humbly acknowledge their intellectual limitations, this is important because it eliminates intellectual arrogance;
3. It urges them to engage in continuous research so that one would act with knowledge at any given time rather than acting out of conjecture,
4. It stresses the fact that truth and a clear vision of reality cannot be based on conjecture, *al-zann*; and,
5. It equates knowledge with truth and equates conjecture with falsehood and error, *al-ḍalāl*.

The author has attempted in this article to trace these injunctions and put them in this sequence as a theory of knowledge. It was this mindset that in the past served as a driving force behind the intellectual dynamism and technological innovations of the Islamic state during its glorious days. It was equally the epistemology that humbled them and allowed

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41. *Al-Nahl* (16): 78.

42. *Al-Isrāʾ* (17): 85.

43. *Ṭā-Hā* (20): 114.

44. *Al-Najm* (53): 28.

45. *Yūnus* (10): 32.

them to enjoy all the values of moderation as exposed above. If the principles of moderation are developed within the context of this theory of knowledge and gradually inculcated in our youths they will become more responsible and less idle.

## Conclusion

The discussion of the foregoing pages can be summarised in the following points: First, the root of the present world crises is the corruption of knowledge that heavily manifests itself in secular extremism that has yielded religious extremism. The absence of peace and stability in the Muslim world, the emergence of a generation of right seekers without corresponding responsibility, and the disunity and fragmentation of the Muslim world is largely due to such reciprocal extremism.

Second, the original Muslim-Christian relationship of sympathy and closeness was hijacked through the two processes of Westernisation of Christianity and Zionisation of the West. Most of the Christian-Muslim tensions including wars launched by the Crusaders resulted from the Westernisation of Eastern Christianity and the Muslim fragmentation was intensified after the Zionisation of the West.

Third, *al-wasatiyyah* is a divine value; it is a wisdom that cuts across the three levels of human thought, behaviour and action. It is a state between two extremes: one of excess, and the other, negligence. What makes moderation the best of any context is that it is a state between two blameworthy extremes.

Fourth, the Islamic definition of moderation is linked to the obligation of enjoining that which is good and forbidding that which is bad with wisdom and humility.

Fifth, like the term “*uṣūli*,” which is a translation from the English “fundamentalism,” “*taṭarruf*,” though Arabic, is a translation from the English “extremism.” Given any ideological warfare situation, translated concepts can be very

misleading. As a result, we propose the usage of terminologies of the Islamic legacy such as “*al-ghuluw*” and “*al-tashaddud*.”

Sixth, the relative stability and intactness under one authority called the Caliph as it was enjoyed during the classical period of Islam, was largely due to their application of the *wasatī* epistemology in terms of continuity of research and knowledge production, as well as adhering to the ethics of disagreements.

Finally, the 21st century Muslim crises find root in the Middle East. Central to these crises is reciprocal extremisms. The Jewish extremism has yielded Zionism, which keeps provoking Arab extremism to feed on it. It is unfortunate that the Arab extreme reaction has yielded a strong form of Arab nationalism and this has adversely affected the Muslim unity.

In summary, *al-wasatiyyah* as defined earlier is the theory of knowledge whose application can end secular extremism, which for decades, has been feeding on religious extremism. This is orchestrated and perpetuated by a few extremist capitalists at the expense of the world majority. Thus, moderation is the mindset, which can neutralise the greedy powerful world minority that has hijacked the will of the majority of Jews, Christians and Muslims around the world. As such, moderate Muslims should engage in dialogues with their moderate Christian and Jewish counterparts; similarly, moderate Shiʿites ought to communicate with moderate Sunnis. Until the day that all schools of thought and all sects see unity in diversity and engage themselves in serious and continuous knowledge production with divine consciousness, all attempts to regain Muslim independence will remain mere dreams.