

ISLAM: EXTREMISM AND MODERATION

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Islam has, for many years now, been torn between radical fundamentalist groups and the more intellectually moderate groups. With both groups claiming to follow the true Islam, an individual may have a difficult time in practicing one's faith.

The ambition of this essay will be to investigate some of the major differences between the movements, more specifically the Wahhabi/Salafi movement practiced in Saudi Arabia and the more moderate approach emphasized by numerous Islamic Scholars. Grappling with these issues in my own search for the authentic Islam, this essay will provide a view of both sides with an attempt to justify the moderate position over the strict, literalist one. The intention is to show why the moderate intellectual position is more rooted in Islamic principles and values than the monotonous fanatic position. Due to the many sects, some with more extreme positions like the Khawarij alongside the more rational such as the Mu'tazilites, I decided it would be an enlightening task to break down both sides and challenge the history of both.

“O you who believe, be custodians of Justice and bear witness before God, even if against yourself or your family or your relatives.”¹ There are many ways an individual can interpret this text. Some may see it as a call to battle corruption such as extremism and oppression, while on the other hand some may see it as a means of enforcing their own oppression on the vulnerable, all the while believing that they are the custodians of God's justice on earth.²

With Islam being the second largest religion in the world with some 1.5 billion adherents and being the fastest growing religion in the world, different views and perspectives are inevitable as with other major world religions. Islam has for many

¹Qur'an 4:135.

²Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Quran*.

years now been torn between radical fundamentalist groups and more intellectually moderate groups. With both groups claiming to follow the authentic Islam, one may have difficulty in distinguishing which is the correct path. It is unfortunate that in the minds of many non-Muslims today the perception of Islam is an intolerant, oppressive and repulsive religion. The media plays a significant role in this perspective; however, it is also simply a lack of understanding and judgmental attitudes which prevents non-Muslims and Muslims alike from studying history, more particularly, Islamic history which indeed has impacted modern times profoundly.

This essay will show how moderation and intellectualism are more rooted in Islamic values and principles than the non-tolerant extreme positions such as Wahhabism. This will be done by firstly exploring the Wahhabi origins and contemporary issues relating to their beliefs. Furthermore, the concept of moderation in Islam will be elaborated upon along with a glimpse into Islamic intellectualism and finally, the contemporary views of moderate Muslims.

Wahhabism is a movement practiced in Saudi Arabia which emerged in the eighteenth century. The founder of this thought was a man by name of Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1206/1792). He grew up in a Hanbali family of jurists and his upbringing could be stated as severe and stern.³ The basic beliefs of the Wahhabis are rooted in the idea that only the first three centuries of Islam could be said to be authentically Islamic to any extent at all. The following period was anything but Islamic and humanity must strive to re-establish this epoch which is also regarded by many as the apparent golden age of Islam.⁴

An issue that must be reflected upon is how and why the Wahhabi movement lasted to our times now? All extreme, infamous Islamic groups that have emerged in recent decades such as the Taliban and al-Qa’ida have derived many of their austere practices from the Wahhabi movement. The reason behind this attractiveness is stated by a scholar of Islamic law who says:

the spread of ‘Abd al-Wahhabs’ thought in the Muslim world had little to do with the thought of the founder of the movement. Much of its missionary success is due to its successful co-optation of archetypal symbolisms of Islamic authenticity and legitimacy.⁵

The above quote implies that it is not simply the teachings of ‘Abd al-Wahhabs’ thought that has drawn the attention of so many, but the attractiveness lies in the

³Hanbali is one of the four major Sunni Islamic schools of law. The other three being: Hanafi, Maliki and Shafi’i.

⁴John Esposito, *World Religions Today*, 207.

⁵Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning With God*, 228.

pietistic display. With promoting a strict literalism of religious text, this approach has portrayed a type of religious authenticity. Consequently, extremist groups have also incorporated these methods thinking that they are practicing the original Islam.

Perhaps, the greatest point of critique on the Wahhabi movement can be directed towards its failure to adapt to contemporary issues. The group holds to the past and believes that any type of change is a religious innovation. In other words, change is completely unacceptable.⁶ The followers of these movements often bombard fellow Muslims with pedantic claims which at times appear suffocating and frustrating, if not completely illogical. Here are some examples of acts that are forbidden in parts of the Muslim world today: music, singing, and dancing; the giving of flowers; clapping hands in applause; writing novels; shaving one's beard; keeping or petting dogs, and; standing up in honor of someone.⁷ It is important to note that most Muslim countries do not adhere to such practices and tend to lean towards moderation.

Furthermore, other issues include Muslims studying Islam in Western Universities. The extremists claim that Western education systems are deliberately designed to confuse Muslims and will instill doubts in their minds concerning their religion by presenting to students various Shi'a⁸ sects or the Mu'tazilite⁹ movement. In addition, the Islamic history covered in these schools is a distorted image of what actually happened. There is also the matter of interaction with non-Muslims and the role of woman in Islam. As for the former, it is quite simple, the extremists say that only Muslims have a chance at attaining salvation and indeed only if those Muslims do not oppose their views. As with regards to woman, an abundance of restrictions has been placed concerning various aspects of everyday life.¹⁰ As has been mentioned above most Muslim countries do not follow such practices and lean towards moderation. Most Muslims will concede that these rules and regulations are simply fatuous and illogical. The rest of this essay will speak of how a moderate version of Islam views such categories of life.

The term moderation has been used frequently in this essay and will now be explicated. Moderation does not mean abandoning the traditions of old and simply adhering to the normative of contemporary life. Rather, moderation is flourishing in the world, with the advancements brought forth, while also establishing the Islamic etiquette of character, morals, and ethics. Numerous reports attributed to

⁶Andrew Rippin, *Muslims*, 196.

⁷Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 160.

⁸The Shi'a sect is the second largest in Islam, comprising about 15% of the Muslims in the world. Followers of this movement reject the first three successors to the Prophet Muhammad and claim that the position rightly belonged to the Prophet's cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib.

⁹The Mu'tazila was a school of Islamic theology, who emphasized the use of reason and rationality.

¹⁰El Fadl, 159.

the Prophet Muhammad mention him as saying that he has come to perfect character and that Islam is rooted in morality and ethics which includes interaction with one's children, spouse, co-workers and fellow non-Muslims. The notion of an Islamic golden age which Muslims must strive to rejuvenate must be re-considered. It is illogical to say that God would decree certain immutable principles for humankind to follow at one specific time in history while we are constantly changing and evolving. Rather, moderates say, every age is an age to be cherished and approached intellectually.

“And say, Lord increase me in knowledge.”¹¹ The role of intellect is imperative in Islam and much emphasis is placed upon the acquisition of knowledge. The Islamic tradition is covered with statements regarding the virtue of knowledge and understanding and condemns ignorance and foolishness. Furthermore, the Qur'an constantly stresses the need for intelligence in deciphering the “signs” or “messages” of God. Muslims are not to abdicate their reason but to look at the world attentively and with curiosity.¹² Considering this, moderates tend to approach the above-mentioned views of the Wahhabi extremist groups differently. For instance, the notions of salvation held by extremist groups, moderates say, are uncharacteristic of an all merciful, loving God. Ultimately the knowledge of who is saved concerning Muslims and non-Muslims belongs solely to God and is not for humans to judge.¹³ With regards to woman, moderates believe that the Quran and Sunnah¹⁴ do not place upon woman unrealistic and foolish restrictions. The approach to these concepts, and more, must be broad, inclusive, and progressive, all the while respecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals.¹⁵

The issue of extremism and moderation is not a new one. The matter dates back to the time after the Prophet Muhammad in which several groups emerged such as the khawarij¹⁶ and Mu'tazilites, each with their own agenda. This essay explored the origins of Wahhabism, and issues relating to their beliefs. Also, the concept of moderation in Islam was explained along with a glimpse into Islamic intellectualism and finally, the contemporary views of moderate Muslims.

The Islamic tradition is replete with the praise of knowledge and warnings against ignorance. The Prophet Muhammad declared scholars to be the inheritors of Prophets and the pursuit of knowledge as the way to paradise. Considering this, universities, scholars and scholarships were brought forth to support this vision. As

¹¹Qur'an 20:114.

¹²Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 143.

¹³For more on the issue of religious tolerance in Islam, see:

Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2002).

¹⁴Traditions of Prophet Muhammad.

¹⁵Tariq Ramadan, *Islam: The Essentials*, 154.

¹⁶The Khawarij were a violent group of extremists who emerged in the first century of Islam, shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

Muslims sought the divine will they encompassed the richness of God's creation and the diversity of God's creatures. The heritage of the Greeks, Persians and Romans were all uncovered by Muslims, and thousands of Muslims travelled all over the world with the singular goal of calling to the beauty of Islam. From math, to philosophy, and science, these fields have been impacted greatly by the seekers of the Divine.¹⁷ This is the Islamic message, one of justice, compassion, mercy, equality and diversity. Muslims must struggle to confront the ugly with this most beautiful vision. Indeed, that is the jihad Muslims must embark upon. Moderation and intellectualism is more rooted in Islamic values and principles than the non-tolerant extreme positions such as Wahhabism. The Prophet embodied ethics, morals, and character. The emphasis must be placed on these attributes rather than constructing fanciful hotels, shopping centers and one must acknowledge one's own limitations and frustrations. Ultimately, the vision must be brought back to its rightful path. And that path leads to God. And God is beautiful.

¹⁷Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam*, 47.

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