

“Islamic Moderation” in Perspectives: A Comparison Between Oriental and Occidental Scholarships

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Abstract:

‘Islamic moderation’ has received a great deal of academic and media attention both in the West and in the East. Yet, the denotation of the very term still remains abundantly paradoxical as different regions and contexts provide different sheds of meanings. In the western scholarship, Islamic moderation is concerned with liberal social norms, hermeneutics, political pluralism, democratic process, organizational affinities, and views of state legitimacy over the monopoly of violence, some kind of adaptation, willingness to cooperate or compromise. However, it is by no means exhaustive as its definition in Islamic scholarship provides some unlike constituents. To define moderation, Muslim scholars, firstly explores to lexical meanings of its Arabic substitute “wasatiyyah”. Secondly, they explore the textual meanings of the word “wasatiyyah” used in the orthodox text i.e the Quran and traditions (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). According to them, moderation is a best suited, justly balanced or middle position between two extremes i.e. extremism and laxity. Their use of the term, is contextualized in terms of counter-extremism, modest socio-religious behaviour and temperate legal position. This research finds out a considerable textual and contextual difference in the use of the term ‘Islamic moderation’ between the East and the West. Hence, this study aims to explore the lack of integration between both scholarships in this issue.

Keywords: *Islamic moderation, Oriental, Occidental scholarships.*

A. INTRODUCTION

‘Islamic moderation’, ‘moderate Muslim’ and ‘moderate Islam’ are highly contextualized terms as deferent regions and contexts provide different sheds of denotations. However, these particular vocabularies were generated by the media and academia at the backdrop of Iranian revolution in 1979 to describe Muslims, Islam and Islamists and their relationship with the West. In this context, specialists found ‘Moderation’ as a suitable vocab to deal with the then newly emerged situation. Since then, “it has become a catchword for journalists, scholars, policy-makers as well as politicians. For instance, Geneive Abdo, an American journalist of Middle East origin, came up with the phrase “moderate Islamists” (as opposed to “hard-line Islamists”). Some of her fellow journalists immediately adopted it” (Hoveyda, 2001).

In terms of theoretical connection, "the debates about moderation have flourished in the study of party politics (notably in the West) and the fate of post-revolutionary groups faced with integration into institutionalized politics. Most frequently, discussions about moderates and radicals emerge in debates about the merits and risks of democratic inclusivity, the challenges of democratization, and the substance of democracy itself" (Schwedler, 2006).

Unlike, the Muslim use of the term "moderation" dates back much earlier and goes back to its Arabic equivalent "*al-wasatiyyah*" (*wasatiyya*) which has mentioned several times in the Muslims' religious orthodox scripture, the Qur'an. Yet, perhaps the most popular one is in Chapter 2, verse 143.

{وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا} [البقرة: 143]

"And thus, have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you."

It should be noted that the term 'moderation', in Islamic scholarship, was born in a context unlike the Western scholarship. It seems that the Western use of the term is mostly concerned with its political agenda in the Muslim world. Whereas, Islamic use of it fundamentally refers to Islamic theology, ethics, belief system, legal positioning, politics etc. This piece of study aims at addressing this existing paradox in the use of the term 'Islamic moderation'. Hence, the author attempts to find out the context of the use of the term moderation in the Islamic as well as Western scholarship.

B. METHODS

This paper used comparative explanation between oriental and occidental scholarships in understanding of discourse about Islamic moderation. This research finds out a considerable textual and contextual difference in the use of the term 'Islamic moderation' between the East and the West. Hence, this study aims to explore the lack of integration between both scholarships in this issue.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Definition of Moderation in the West

Joshua Muravchik & Charles Szrom admit the reality that "Moderation' is typically defined narrowly as 'becoming truly committed to democratic practices'" (Muravchik J. and Szrom C, n.d.), Murat Somer, (2012) made it abundantly clear when he defines moderation "as an adjustment to at least some attributes of the centre in a particular country at a certain time." In his view,

"Moderation theories always treat moderation as some kind of an adaptation, willingness to cooperate or compromise, and focus on discovering which interests or ideological attributes make it happen."

In broad terms, as Jillian Schwedler, (2006) asserts, "*Moderation*—a process rather than a category—entails change that might be described as movement along a continuum from radical to moderate. Moderation is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) tied to liberal notions of individual rights and democratic notions of tolerance, pluralism, and cooperation. To become more moderate, the scholarship implies, actors must become more open to the possibility that other perspectives are valid, even if not equally so. But mere participation in elections or democratic processes—behaviour that might appear to indicate the embrace of liberal and democratic norms of governance—is alone

insufficient as an indicator of moderation; participation is a form of political behaviour that a group might adopt for purely strategic purposes while continuing to harbour a more radical political agenda. Scholarly models thus posit a variety of ways to determine when moderation has taken place and to identify the mechanisms that bring about that change. He reserves the term *moderation* to refer to attitudes changing positively toward democracy and adopts instead the term *de-radicalization* as the process of abandoning militancy.”

The author further adds, “moderation more or less amounts to upholding the norms and practices observed in Western, liberal and secular democracies” (Schwedler, 2011). Accordingly, “moderation may involve a movement: towards acceptance of competitive politics and electoral and non-electoral constraints; from state-centred to society-centred, civil and reformist movements; towards rapprochement and intermediation between opposing ideological groupings; from monopoly of religious truth to the acknowledgment of ambiguity and multiplicity; from closed to more open worldviews tolerant of alternative truth-claims” (Schwedler, 2011).

This idea may be better understood in a comparative perspective between ‘moderate Islamists and radical Islamists. According to Janine A. Clark “Moderate Islamists often are those who are willing to participate in the democratic system, whereas radical Islamists are deemed as those who reject participation largely due to their rejection of secularism. Islamist radicals, although divided, reject participation with any secular system-authoritarian or democratic. This moderation is deemed to express itself in terms of Islamists' greater acceptance and understanding of democracy, political liberties, and the rights of women and minorities” (Clark. J.A, 2006).

Muravchik & Szrom say "Moderate" implies a lesser quantity or degree of something. A moderate leftist, for example, is not too far Left. Is a "moderate Muslim" not too Islamic? To put it this way is to concede that Islam is, properly understood, antithetical to the West, and that at issue is only the intensity of the antipathy.

These varied definitions of who is a ‘moderate’ – based on, respectively, liberal social norms, hermeneutics, political pluralism, democratic process, organizational affinities, and views of state legitimacy over the monopoly of violence – are by no means exhaustive (White, 2012)

2. Definition of Moderation: Muslim Scholars' Views

To define moderation, Muslim scholars, firstly explores the lexical meanings of its Arabic equivalent “*wasatiyyah*”. Generally, the word *wasatiyyah* in Arabic lexicons refers to several shades of meaning such as justice or balance (*al-'adl*), merit or excellence (*al-faql*), better (*al-khairiyyah*), median (*al-bainiyyah*) (Al-Sallabi, 1999).

Secondly, they explore the textual meanings of the word “*wasatiyyah*” used in the orthodox scripture i.e the Quran and traditions (*Sunnah*) of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). There is no mentioning of the word *wasatiyyah* in its form in the Quran but there are at least four derivatives from its root *al-wasaṭ*. They are, *wasatān* in Chapter 2: 143; *al-Wuṣṭā* in Chapter 2: 238; *awsaṭ* in Chapter 5:89 & chapter 68:28; *wasatnā* in Chapter 100:5. The meanings revolve around balanced, best choice between two good things as well as two bad things or middle position etc. (Al-Sallabi, 1999).

However, Abdul Qadir defines *wasatiyyah* as “the competence of Muslim nation to do justice and the excellence to bear witness over all the beings on the earth, and establish evidence upon them. (Qadir Farid Abdul, n.d.). To him, a thing could not be attributed to *wasatiyyah* if two attributes i.e ‘best choice’ and ‘balanced’ are not perfectly combined in it.”

(Rida, 1990) defines "*wasat* is justice and best option. It is because any increase over what exactly expected is excessiveness and any lack in it is negligence. Both excessiveness and negligence are against orthodoxy. It is therefore evil and blameworthy. The 'best' option is the middle ground between two choices."

Kemal Hassan (2011) says "the essence of Islamic moderation is the attainment of justice and moral excellence, and the avoidance of extremes and injustice which may or may not cause unnecessary hardship or burden for oneself or for others."

Yusuf (Al-Qaradawi, 2011) defines *wasatiyyah* is "a balance that equilibrates the two opposite ends, in which neither ends stand alone with its supremacy or banish its counterpart; in which neither ends take more than it deserves and dominates its opponent."

Al-Farfur (1988) sees *wasatiyyah* is "a recommended posture that occurs to the people of sound nature and intellect, distinguished by its aversion to both extremism and manifest neglect".

According to Wahbah Al-Zuhayli, (2006) "in the common parlance of the people of our time, *wasatiyyah* means moderation and balance (*I'tidāl*) in belief, morality and character, in the manner of treating others and in the applied systems of socio-political order and governance."

Wasatiyyah, in fact, is taking a midmost position between a three-dimensional thing no matter whether it is behaviour, attitude, action or discourse. For example, moderation is the median position between two opposites - excessiveness and laxity. Similarly, if a thing is two-dimensional, taking the best of it is moderation. For example, taking truth is moderation if there are only two choices left - truth and false.

Moderation is a value that helps us to make a most appropriate or balanced moral and behavioural judgement. If there are two good things, moderation is following the comparatively the better one; if there are two bad things, moderation is taking comparatively the less wicked one; if there are two choices - bad and good, moderation is adopting the good one Al-Sallabi, (1999).

3. Western Contextualization of Moderation

Democratization: in the popular definitions, moderation is narrowly linked to democratic practices (Schwedler, 2006) and liberal democratic values that often demand liberal commitments (White, 2012). Thus, it may be right to argue that Western policy makers are used to see democratization as one of factors leading to moderation. If such is the case, the moderate players should adopt 'political inclusion' which is one of the most abiding concerns about democratization (Schwedler, 2006). Political inclusion is clearly far more likely to produce an overall moderate political sphere, though it is unlikely to eliminate all forms of radicalism. It will, however, deny radicals portions of their support base and thus produce an overall effect of moderation even if no political groups have substantively changed their normative commitments (Schwedler, 2006). However, some scholars do not entirely agree with this notion. Yet, participation in democratic process alone is insufficient as an indicator of moderation. For example, Nancy Bermeo, who argues that moderation is not a necessary condition for democracy (Wegner and Pellicer, 2009). Yet, 'inclusion' may be a way of moderating radical political actors, or at the very least elevating moderates and weakening radicals (Schwedler, 2011).

De-radicalization: *moderate* often used to describe pro-democratic forces who don't rock the boat. In other words, it is utilized as an antonym for the term *radical*- who demand substantive systemic change and strongly oppose the power configurations of the status quo (Schwedler, 2011). The terms moderate and radical are used more generally to reflect an actor's position vis-à-vis the existing political (or economic or social) system or practices. Moderates are conventionally those who seek gradual change by working within the existing political system; radicals, by contrast, seek to overthrow that system in its entirety (Schwedler, 2011).

De-radicalization refers to 'ideological moderation', which generally means "the abandonment, postponement, or revision of radical goals that enables an opposition movement to accommodate itself to the give and take of 'normal' competitive politics. It entails a shift toward a substantive commitment to democratic principles, including the peaceful alternation of power, ideological and political pluralism, and citizenship rights" (Wickham, 2004).

Moderation was determined in a comparative context. Among Islamic groups, when a group is more pro-western, non-violent, liberal and a rival to anti-western groups, is commonly considered as moderate. For example, Barelvis (Barelvis is a school of Sunni Islamic thought and practice that nominally traces its roots to the writings of Ahmed Raza Khan Barelvi) are seen as a moderate group. By and large, they reject violence; condemn the neo-traditionalist interpretations of contemporary Taliban groups and their austere social ethic; adopt a tolerant view toward other Sunni sects, Shi'a, and those of other faiths; embrace the role of music, dance, and celebrations of spiritual saints; are deferential toward state authority; and do not get overly exercised about theological difference. To their critics, the Barelvis are syncretists who blend questionable Sufi practices with old Hindu traditions; display a disconcerting devotion to the Prophet Muhammad that borders on shirk (polytheism); pay insufficient attention to the early traditions of the ancestors; and seem uninterested in defending the faith from internal and external adversaries alike.

Quite understandably, there have been efforts to promote Barelvis as a counterweight to both the ideology and influence of Taliban-style groups. Western commentators, for their part, have championed the cause of the Barelvis and received considerable attention in the US government circles. The US consulate in Lahore initiated an outreach program to Barelvi clerics in Punjab and funded the restoration of shrines in the province. The US even funded the Sunni Ittihad Council, a Barelvi umbrella group, to organize an anti-Taliban rally in 2009 (Associated Press 2012). On a host of political, hermeneutic, and social issues, the Barelvis do indeed comport rather closely with the Western liberal ideal. And in many respects, they are more tolerant and pacific than their Sunni brethren (White, 2012).

Pluralism: 'moderate Muslims' is utilized as a counterweight to extremists. Rather, "it centres on the acceptance or rejection of pluralism. In this view, Muslims may still hope and pray for the eventual recognition by all mankind of the truth of Muhammad's message. (Christians and Jews do something similar.) But they may not take up the sword to hasten the advent of that goal or pursue disputes among or with"(Muravchik J. and Szrom C, n.d.). While continuing to seek divine guidance in the Quran and the Sunna, these Islamists have formulated new interpretations of Islam's revealed texts that privilege ideas of pluralism, representation, and human rights. A small but growing body of western scholarship on this trend describes it as the rise of a "liberal" Islam, "modern" Islam, or, drawing on Arabic language sources, the new "Islamic centrism" (*wasatiyyah*) (Muravchik J. and Szrom C, n.d.).

4. Contextualization of Moderation in the Islamic Scholarship

Response to Theological Extremism: In the Islamic scholarship, Moderation first emerged in the domain of the orthodox faith urging no hyperbole or negligence in regard to belief system. For example, in believing the prophets while Christians venerated prophets even worshiped them as well as their statues. The Jews, in contrast, underestimated them, even killed them. But Islam takes a moderate position as it venerates them but never worships them as Christians do, keeps their dignity as they deserve and does not underestimate them as Jews do.

In Islamic sects, *ahl al-sunna wa al-jamā'a*, was developed in a theological debate in which some sects had exaggerated in their orthodox beliefs and some others had neglected them. In this respect, Ibn Taymiyyah aptly asserts that *ahl al-sunna wa al-jamā'a* is the moderate sect as the Muslim is the moderate nation among the other nations. It takes a middle position in regard to the attributes of God Almighty in which *al-Jahamiyya* and *al-Mushabbaha* follow two extreme ends; its takes a central stance in the subject of acts of God in which *al-Qadariyya* and *al-Jabariyya* follow two exaggerated paths; in regards to the companions of the Messenger of Allah, it takes a position between the Shiites and the *Kharijites*.

The sect *al-Mu'aṭṭala* denies all attributes of Allah swt but only one, which is His live existence. And they believe merely intellectual approach to the *Sharia*. If their reason supports a law as good they follow it and if it is deemed as bad they reject it. However, the sect *Mushabbaha* attributes to Allah swt a lack of attributes, and compare His attributes with human attributes. For example, they compare Allah's throne (*al-'Arsh*) with bed, which is used by human. Yet, the sect *al-Jabariyya* believes that human's obedience to halal and haram depends on their wishful choice. Because what they do, they do because they are forced and they don't have choice or will. In regard to *Al-Khawarijites*, it believes that a sinful person (*fasīq*) is an infidel and he is destined to the permanent hell fire in the Hereafter. And it is lawful to loot his assets, to kill him, to enslave him and divorce his wife... he is in Hereafter a totally helpless.

Unlike to all above, *Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jamā'a*, takes a middle position as it obligates to believe all the attributes of Allah swt, human's ability, choice and will. He does not forced human to perform anything. Yet, they preform according to their intention and will. He has an advanced knowledge what a person would do.

A moderate legal position: approaches in Islamic jurisprudential school may be categorised into three: first, textualist, liberal and moderate. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, a proponent of moderation explains the nature and effects of these there as follows:

The first: a school, which is concerned with partial texts. They cling to the text in isolation and understand them literally without looking at the intents of Lawgiver (Allah swt) behind them. This group is called by al-Qaradawi as "new *Dhahīriyya*" and he mentioned its six characteristics, are: literal understanding and interpretation; adopting the extreme and hard way; invoking their opinion to the point of arrogance; intolerance to different opinions; defaming their opponents in opinion and labelling them with infidelity; careless to create chaos. The fundamental focuses of this school are: taking the texts with apparent meaning, the denial of understanding the wisdom (*talīc*) behind the text by human reason, underestimating human opinion and not to use it in understanding and reasoning, and the adoption of stricter aspect of the law.

The second, a school is just opposite to the first. It claims to be concerned with the purposes of Islamic Law and spirit of religion; claiming that religion is the essence, not an outward structure;

rejecting authentic traditions of the Prophet; and interpreting the Quran with false hermeneutics. This group has been named by Al-Qaradawi, the new *al-Mu'atṭala*, the disablers of the texts in the name of *maṣālih* and *maqāṣid*. He states their three characteristics namely: ignorance of *Sharia*, the audacity to say without knowledge, and subordination to the West. The main focuses of this school is upholding human reason over revelation.

The third, the school of moderation, which posits itself between two schools mentioned above. This school is an integration between partial texts and general objectives of *Sharia*. Al-Qaradawi mentions six traits and characteristics of this school are: belief in the wisdom of the Islamic law and ensuring the interests of the creation; linking between texts and law; moderate look to all matters of religion and the world; connecting texts to the life and spirit of the age; the adoption of line facilitation; and openness to the world, dialogue and tolerance without compromise.

The pillars that underpin this school, as al-Qaradawi mentions, are: searching for *maqṣad* through known way before delivering any legal rule; understanding the text in the light of their causes and circumstances; distinction between fixed purposes and changeable means; balancing between the constants and variables of the laws; distinction between paying attention to the meanings of worship and dealings.

Counter Terrorism: The issue of moderation is again highlighted at the backdrop of unprecedented spread of Muslim extremism at home and abroad. In this connection, moderation acquired renewed appeal within Muslim majority societies as well as where they are only minority. In many countries a call for moderation was made as a way to encounter Muslim extremism. Different platforms were also created to actualize moderation on the ground. Malaysia's Badawi's Islam Hadari and Iranian president Khatami's call for civilizational dialogue could be good examples of this kind (Kamali M H, 2010).

D. CONCLUSION

Moderation takes on different shades of meanings when it implies to varying mechanisms like inclusion, participation, organizational interest, party autonomy, social learning, and socio-economic factors (Karakaya S and Yildirim A. K, 2012). It is a slippery concept and its content is a variable by definition (Somer, 2012). What moderation entails can be expected to vary cross-nationally and cross-temporally because moderation entails adjustment to different contexts (Somer, 2012). However, in the western perspective, 'moderation' is not a category, but a process. A process, like democracy, by which radical groups are given a chance to function in a democratic domain. As a result, they leave their revolutionary motto and their radical programmes. They often move from anti-western to pro-western. The characteristic of the western enterprise of moderation merely a political one. For them, it has nothing to do with belief system or legal system. However, Islamic definition of moderation is not limited in a political arena. It is not just a position between militancy and decay but a temperate intellectual, legal, moral and behavioural approach includes all aspects of life. It is a moderation, as Sayyid Qutb mentions, in perception and faith which does not lean to asceticism in the world or physical indulgence in pleasures; in thinking and feeling; in organization and coordination; in the links and relationships. Moderation is a divine method that Allah (Glory be to Him) placed in this nation in order to abide by and to follow to become a role example to the world around it. Furthermore, moderation is a realistic demand and preventive method to protect the nation against the danger of extremists as it protects it against deviant people.

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