

to acquire God's acceptance. This suggests that a moderate personality, one that Islam seeks to develop, leads one to seek to fulfil the rights of God & of human beings, including of one's own self. The Prophet (p): 'Your Lord has rights over you. Your guest, wife & children have rights over you. Fulfill the rights.'

Another basis for extremism is the tendency to project minor details of religious law as foundational pillars of the faith & to insist that people must abide by these at all times. The ongoing sectarian strife among Muslims today, as in the past, is, in a sense, a result of this narrow-minded approach. The chaos that it has created in Muslim society has further emboldened elements who thrive on creating strife in the name of Islam. It has also greatly heightened radicalism & intolerance in Muslim societies.

One crucial aspect in this regard is the marked tendency to ignore the spirit of Islam & the higher aims or purposes of the shariah. Islam, the Prophet (p) remarked, is an easy religion. It has lifted from us heavy burdens. A principle of Islamic jurisprudence is that with change of place & time certain commandments of the shariah must also correspondingly change. The shariah, in fact, facilitates ease if in a certain matter difficulty arises. This principle is a central aspect of Islamic jurisprudence. Ignoring this principle can lead to the religion of ease appearing burdensome & problematic. In turn, this provides further ammunition to the opponents of Islam. It also leads to increasing irreligiousness or distance from religion among many Muslims themselves, providing arguments or excuses for those who are in any case lax in religious matters.

A major issue, the ignoring of which has led to considerable strife & conflict in the name of Islam, is the principle of gradualism in Islam. The deviations that are apparent in numerous Islamic missionary & revivalist movements is precisely because of ignoring this principle. Because they adopted an extreme position on minor issues of the details of the shariah & because they ignored the principle of gradualism in seeking to establish an Islamic society, they degenerated into a 'danger – not just to non-Muslims but also to many Muslims themselves.' Similar movements in Egypt & Algeria met with the same fate, and for the same reason, because of which their activists had to suffer long spells of imprisonment & torture. Throughout Muslim history & currently, Islam has been marshaled in order to seek legitimacy for a range of social movements, and in many such cases Islam has been wrongly deployed & incorrectly interpreted to suit various conflicting political agendas.

The first three centuries after the demise of the Prophet (p) witnessed the emergence of a bewildering number of groups, each of which claimed Islamic legitimacy for itself, (the Kharajites, the Mutzaliyah, the Qadriyah, the Murjiyah). All of these were extreme & imbalanced in terms of ideology & interpretation of Islamic sources. Some of them regarded as kafirs those Muslims who committed heinous sins, while others regarded such sins as having no bearing at all on one's faith. Some of them believed that human actions were wholly determined or predestined by God. Others claimed that humans were fully autonomous.

Nature abhors extremism. So does humanity in general, as well as every pro-human religion. Extreme groups appear to be very pious Muslims, giving great stress to the externals of worship, eating, appearance. They claim that their ideology is based on the Quran, and for every matter they seek to provide Quranic sanction. Because of this, many simple-minded people are taken in by their claims. However, their ideological deviation is extreme, and they consider almost all other Muslims as kafirs & even apostates. They have faulty methods of reasoning & misinterpretation of Islamic teachings.

Extremism & excess in religion have now become a prominent feature of many contemporary Islamic movements. Sectarianism, a form of such extremism, abounds unchallenged, and is reflected in the corpus of writings that these movements have produced, each branding other Islamic groups as irreligious, deviant or even as infidels. One can cite very few instances of different Islamic groups working together.

In our religious circles, in our madrasas great stress is given in the name of Islam to the externals of Muslim identity, on the keeping of the beard, on wearing a cap or donning a burqa, on avoiding imitating people of other religions in matters of external appearance, and on abstaining from what they regard as frivolities, such as music & photography. They resort to immoderate, uncompromising, or fanatical methods for what is lawful (halal) & what is unlawful (haram).

The ideological extremism that is such a characteristic feature of contemporary Islamic movements has caused these to lose the confidence of many people. These movements seek to compensate for the absence of a longstanding role for Islam in collective, including political, affairs almost immediately, although this is actually a task to be attempted only gradually. Ignoring the Islamic principle of gradualism has brought about results entirely opposite to what they had intended. It has wrought chaos & strife within the ranks of those who claim to be engaged in jihad.

Extremism & excess in any sphere, including religion, is against Nature: Islam is the religion of Nature par excellence. Extremism only produce negative results – results entirely the opposite of what its proponents claim they seek to bring about. In every case, it is sure to cause the destruction of a people. The Prophet (p) said, "I warn you of extremism in the Religion for indeed those that came before you were destroyed due to their extremism."

In personal financial affairs, a Muslim is reminded in the Quran to be generous but not spendthrift. God says, "Give the kinsman his due, and the needy, and the wayfarer & squander not your wealth in wantonness. The squanderers were ever brothers of the devils, and the devil was ever an ingrate to his Lord." He continues, "Let not your hand be chained to your neck, nor open it with a complete opening lest you sit down rebuked, denuded." "Hand" is figurative here, meaning generosity. "Chained to thy neck" means stinginess; and its opposite extreme "open with a complete opening" means being overly generous to the point that one does not have any means to take care of one's own responsibilities. Between the two extremes is a middle path, and that is the path of the Muslim. The Quran describes believers in God: "Those who, when they spend, are neither prodigal nor grudging; there is ever a firm station between the two."

Religion must be communicated to children in a way that protects them from manipulation by extremists. They should learn to think for themselves & not accept what they are told uncritically. This is just as valuable for religion as for other fields of knowledge. The Prophet (p), whose moral & intellectual courage stands in stark contrast with the timidity of nearly all those who consider themselves "Islamic scholars", always followed the middle-path. He declared, 'Adopt the path of moderation & you will reach your destination.' Any other path leads to a spiritually & psychologically fragmented state.

The acceptance of horrible social conditions (potholed & unlit roads, clogged canals, dirty gutters, overgrown grass, easily flooded streets & homes, bribes) is a form of extremism which discredits us before our children. Few are they who dare to bear a genuine witness in an age that cries out in anguish for moral guidance. Sitting in mosques listening to boring lectures & hollow statements has failed. Mosques publish pale tracts & make itself feel good by doing marginal charitable works. They don't understand what The Middle Path means. The balanced religion is not just a set of duties or rules we have to put up with (thicket & jungle); it is an on-going source of wonder & contentment...a Path of Freedom!

Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.

ISLAM IS NOT A THICKET OF INJUNCTIONS... The Middle Path

NOR A JUNGLE OF COMMANDMENTS

A basic factor for excess & extremism in the name of religion is a literal interpretation of religious sources, plus an exaggerated egoism. A person or community that has a strong enmity with another person or community is often led to a form of bloated egoism, which is a terrible disease, that goads it to seek to destroy or dominate the other person or community. For this purpose this person or group takes the help of its religious traditions, texts & sources, interpreting them in order to serve their agenda & to create hatred against the 'other'. Individuals & groups have upheld a very literalist interpretation of certain Quranic verses & hadith narrations that suit their mentality & purpose, while conveniently ignoring others that elaborate on & clarify the ones that they focus on. In this way, they have sought to project their own extreme literalist interpretations as normative, seeking to rally simple-minded people behind them. How they have neglected the Divine Will: "And thus We have willed you to be a community of the Middle Way." In Islam, there is no room for revolution, only evolution, of character. Islam's function is not to limit...it's the middle way between excess & neglect. All virtue tends to the golden mean. For "uneducated" Muslims their "version" of Islam is a middle course, but winding, heading straight for conflicting intersections. Push right to the extreme & it becomes wrong. Press all the juice from an orange & it becomes bitter. Even in enjoyment never go to extremes...it becomes boring.

Thought, too subtle, is dull.

Milk a cow too much & you draw blood.

Extremism in religion is to exceed the limits of its legislated boundaries. It could be in worship, stand the whole night in prayer & not sleep; fast continuously not missing one day; not marrying. "Exceed not the limits in your religion." (5:77)

Extremism is in Lenience just as it is in Harshness.

As Muhammad (p) remarked, "Downfall is certain for every form of extremism."

“GOD HAVE APPOINTED YOU A MIDDLE NATION.”

Religion should be reasonable. **No over-denial, no over-indulgence.** It should make total sense to anyone. It should **not** be mired in mysteries. The Middle Path describes the realization of being free of the one-sidedness of perspective that takes the **extremes** of any polarity as objective reality.

What does a mind searching for God think about. A mind that has never met Islam. However, this mind knows what it wants. Here's such a quote: “The religion I wanted should be to metaphysics as metaphysics is to science. It would **not be confined by a narrow rationalism or traffic in mystery** to please its priests. There would be no priests, no separation between nature & things sacred. There would be **no war with the flesh**, if I could help it. **Sex would be natural, not the seat of a curse** upon the species. Finally, I did want a ritual component, daily routine to sharpen the senses & discipline my mind. Above all, I wanted clarity & freedom. I did not want to **trade away reason simply to be saddled with a dogma.**” The Middle Path means being independent without being rebellious, being spiritual without being dogmatic.

Such a thinking, searching mind, Michael Wolfe's, ended up accepting Islam. What he found transcendent & refreshing was that this Middle Path, classified people by their faith & their actions. Judging by merit. **By contrast, Europeans & Americans (those who deem themselves “civilized”), including many who are free of racist notions, automatically class people racially.** Malcolm X saw his nation's salvation in it. “America needs to understand Islam because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem.” Islam's more integral, comprehensive view of life stands in sharp contrast to the tendency of other religions & ideologies to compartmentalize life into the sacred & the profane, body & soul, sensual & spiritual.

In such unbalanced systems people's minds in the best of times are filled with anything but the Truth of God: images from consumer culture, manufactured desires, superstitions, the cliches of

neurotic individualism. In the worst of times minds become occupied with the mass psychoses of nationalism, fanaticism, racism or political hysteria.

The Quran refers to those who follow Islam as the ‘the community of the middle-path’: “**We have made of you a nation justly balanced, that you might be witnesses over the nations, & the Messenger a witness over yourselves.**” (2:143) Essentially a message of renewal, Islam has done its part on the world stage to return the forgotten taste of life's lost sweetness to millions of people. Its book, the Quran, caused Goethe to remark, “You see, this teaching never fails; with all our systems, we cannot go, and generally speaking no man can go, further.”

Our temperate Prophet (p) said, ‘Adopt the path of moderation’ (*aleikum hadiyan qasidan*), repeating this sentence three times to stress his point very clearly, after which he added, ‘**He who adopts the path of extremism will be subdued.**’

Some people think that to live an Islamic life is “restrictive.” Islam however, was revealed as a balanced way of living. Allah created all the humans with what is called a natural state/desire. Islam recognises that within this state there are motivations that influence a person's role on earth (a desire for good food & drink, to have a home, a desire for love & sex, to protect & be protected and to be successful & strong). **Without some form of control & limit, all of these legitimate motives could prove very dangerous.** So what constitutes the perfect control for the Natural State? It must be a method that provides an organised yet practical demonstration of how to balance all these natural human desires. It cannot be something that goes against the Natural State, by placing on it extra burdens. Likewise, it cannot be something that allows the human desires to run wild without any form of control.

Islam teaches balance in thought & action. Although some practitioners may go to extremes, the religion itself does not condone any form of extremism or fanaticism. In fact, finding the middle path is a general principle of behaviour in Islam. The Quran contain specific guidelines steering people away from extremes in particular cognitive, social & behavioral areas. Islam endorses sociopolitical & socioeconomic systems that represent a balanced, middle ground.

The Quran & the Hadith very clearly & explicitly warn against extremism in matters of religion by such

terms as ghulu, tanattu' & tashaddud. Allah says, ‘**Do not commit excess in your religion.**’ Religion should not be full of melancholy & hypochondria...Apathy or vehemence. Or be one-sided. Have you heard those **unbalanced khutbahs** that just bashes the brothers...and speak so sweetly of the sisters. Brother-, husband-, man-bashing has gone extreme...Khateeb's Gone Wild. Let them be reminded of these “sweet” sisters in the Quran: Abu Lahab's wife (in Hell wearing a garland of fire; Lut & Noah's wives...already judged to be in the Fire. In our times there are quite a large following of women in the category of those **rebellious** sisters. Like there are brothers who are in the category of Abu Lahab & Pharaoh.

Islam teaches its followers that any given issue has polar extremes to which the devil calls people according to their individual weaknesses. For example, if a person tends to be harsh, Satan will use this to seduce him into committing tyranny. On the other hand, if a person tends to be sensitive, Satan will use this to plague him with excessive worries & sadness. Therefore, Muslims must search for & adhere to the middle ground in every issue in order to avoid the snares & deceptions of the accursed devil. This general principle helps guide Muslims away from extreme mannerisms & behaviors.

Islam is a religion of moderation: Its true virtue is the mean between two extremes. It opposes every form of excess. Its principles & laws are based on a natural system of balance, appealing across cultural, ethnic & geographical boundaries. Some commandments of the Quran & the Prophet's practice on the same issues appear, on the face of it, to be, in some cases, particularly forceful, and, in other cases, unexpectedly soft & flexible. This is because these Quranic verses & Hadith statements have their own particular background & context, addressing particular persons or groups. This is in accordance with the wisdom & demands of the Islamic missionary imperative & the needs of the law. As the noted jurist Allama Shatibi notes in his book Al-Moafaqat: ‘When you ponder on the principles of the shariah you will find that they stand for moderation. If you perceive them as leaning towards a certain extreme, know that this is in opposition to another existing or expected extreme. Thus, generally speaking, the aspect of forceful stressing in some principles of the shariah is related to the need for warning, or in order to instill fear, with regard to those people whose religion is faulty or who are lax in matters of religion. On

ISLAM HAS BEEN HIJACKED BY A DISCOURSE OF EXTREME ANGER & THE RHETORIC OF RAGE.

the other hand is the aspect that inclines to grace, flexibility & hope, which is with regard to those who are overwhelmed by extremes & fears in matters of religion.’

The mild-mannered Prophet (p) said, ‘**Do not be harsh** unto your own selves or else this harshness will be made binding on you. A certain group enforced such harshness upon itself. The remnants of this group are now to be found in churches & monasteries.’

Extremism can take different forms, but all of them entail crossing or trespassing the acceptable boundaries or limits – irrespective of whether this is in matters of religion or in any other affair. On the occasion of his farewell pilgrimage the Prophet (p) asked his companion Abdullah Ibn Abbas to collect some stones in order to pelt the devil at Mina. The latter selected small stones. Taking the stones from him, the Prophet (p) said, ‘Yes, this sort of stones. You should save yourself from extremism in religion.’ From this incident one can gauge how, using this example, the Prophet (p) wanted to warn his followers to abstain from extremism in religious matters – so much so that he advised his companion to use small, not massive, stones for the ritual.

Extremism in religious matters is closely & inextricably linked to the personal & social conditions & contexts of those who articulate or uphold such understandings of their faith. **A person who is immoderate in their personal & social life is most likely to be immoderate or extreme in their religious views.** The religious or intellectual perception of an individual is deeply influenced by their own actions & behaviour patterns. This is why the Quran place such stress on the **proper training of a person's personality** so that they develop a balanced & moderate character that is reflected in all aspects of their life.

When the Prophet (p) learned that some people had decided to fast continuously, to abstain from marriage, to give up eating meat in order to control their lust, or to renounce sleeping on beds as part of their worship he became enraged. Over-denial would be to purposely create rigorous ascetic practices, thinking that suffering brings some kind of merit. Over-indulgence would be indulging, even when it hurts someone else. He advised these people to adopt a moderate lifestyle & thereby seek

DO NOT COMMIT EXCESS IN YOUR RELIGION

QURAN 4:171

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