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Laxity, Moderation and Extremism in Islam

Aisha B. Lemu

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE of ISLAMIC THOUGHT



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THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES

The publication program of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) has already addressed important issues in the field of Islamic thought and the Islamization of knowledge. In this respect a number of books have already appeared in several languages under thirteen main series: *Accessing the Islamic Intellectual Heritage*; *Dissertations*; *Human Development*; *Indices*; *Islamic Methodology*; *Islamization of Culture*; *Islamization of Knowledge*; *Issues in Islamic Thought*; *Lectures*; *Occasional Papers*; *Perspectives on Islamic Thought*; *Research Monographs* and *Studies in the Islamization of Knowledge*.

The *Occasional Papers* series, published by the Institute's London Office, covers a number of research papers, articles and lectures from the Institute's world-wide program as well as from Muslim scholars willing to make contributions. These are presented individually in the form of booklets that can be easily read or referred to. It is hoped that the booklets will reach students, scholars, and specialists as well as major sections of the world's Muslims alike in order to generate a fruitful debate on the vital issue of Islamization, and to create an awareness of the intellectual crisis in its various shapes and forms, while encouraging an active role in the proposed course of action and solution. This series is also translated into other languages.

Much of this paper is a summary of Shaikh Yusuf al Qaradawi's *Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism*. The paper has effectively covered the topic and brought to light many useful references from the Qur'an, the Hadith and various historical sources.

The use of Islamic terminology in transliteration is a policy of the IIIT. Some of the terms used are untranslatable, while others are so important that the Institute felt that familiarity with them is necessary for a better understanding of Islamic issues. These terms have been footnoted once or sometimes explained briefly between brackets. All those which have not yet been accepted in Anglo-Saxon dictionaries are in italic. As many of these occur

more than once, readers are advised to refer to the relevant footnotes whenever necessary.

When mentioning dates the Islamic one comes first separated from the Gregorian one by a slash. When an Islamic date is mentioned alone, it is followed by AH.

The translation of the Qur'an used in this series is that of Yusuf Ali (Amana Corporation, revised, 1989). However we made changes to verses quoted from it whenever we deemed it necessary for the sake of elucidation and precision of meaning.

IIIT, London
1413/1993

Introduction

This is a very important issue for us to address in the Muslim world today. Paradoxically, though, it is an issue we seldom address. Why is it so important, and why do we seldom address it? It is important because it affects our relationship with one another as well as with non-Muslims, and thus the spread of Islam—all crucial concerns for the future of the Ummah. Why then do we seldom speak about it? Because to do so is to run the risk of being abused, misunderstood and quoted out of context by people who cannot tolerate any opinion other than their own, even if that other opinion has a sound basis in Islamic teachings.

For much of what follows I am deeply indebted to the celebrated scholar and writer Shaikh Yusuf al Qaradawi, most particularly in his *Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism*¹. This book has effectively covered the topic and brought to light many useful references from the Qur'an, the Hadith and other historical sources. A lot of my paper is summary and quotation from al Qaradawi's book. However, I have endeavored to bring to the topic some insights gained from my experience in Nigeria and other Muslim countries, though I have no intention to relate my argument consistently to any specific locality or group. Rather, I hope to make my observations general enough to be pertinent to as wide a context as possible, while recognizing the need to address individual communities with individual prognoses and insights.

Definition

For a start, it is essential to define the terms used in the title of this paper: Laxity, Moderation and Extremism. The definition of **laxity** is easy. It means carelessness and looseness. Laxity in Islam means failure to follow the basic teachings—negligence of

1. New edition revised and edited by A.S. al Shaikh-Ali and Mohammad B.E. Wasfy, jointly published by IIIT and American Trust Publications, Herndon, Va. 1991. Hereafter cited as *IA*.

the prescribed acts of worship and failure to submit to the moral guidance of the Shari'ah in respect of various aspects of the Islamic way of life. This may be due to ignorance, weakness, upbringing, social pressure, hostile educational and cultural policy, or lack of understanding of the moral principles and the wisdom underlying Islamic injunctions and prohibitions. Laxity refers not to those who have consciously rejected Islam. Rather, it refers to those who believe in God but do not avail themselves of His guidance. This condition can therefore often be cured by tactful *da'wah*² and reasoned discussion whereby the careless person learns to care about his or her relationship with God and with other people.

What then is **moderation** in Islam? Moderation means to carry out to the best of one's ability what Allah (SWT)³ has prescribed and to avoid what He has forbidden, to understand the wisdom of His Laws and moral guidance and to grasp and apply the basic Islamic principles to every new situation as it arises. Having complied with the prescribed aspects of worship and moral discipline, a moderate person may, if he is so inclined, attempt to purify himself and come closer to Allah by supererogatory acts of worship in the form of voluntary *salah*⁴, *sawm*⁵, *zakah*⁶, *hajj*⁷,

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2. *da'wah*: Invitation; call. Refers to the duty on Muslims to invite or call upon others to return to the straight and natural path of Islam. This, according to the Qur'an, has to be done with wisdom and gracious advice. *Da'wah* is addressed to both Muslims and non-Muslims.
 3. SWT—*Subhānahu wa Ta'ālā*: May He be praised and may His transcendence be affirmed. Said when using the name of the divine majesty.
 4. *salah* (pl. *salawat*): The supreme act of worship in Islam, inadequately translated as 'prayer'. Basically there are five appointed ritual *salawat*; but a person can—and does—perform voluntary ones.
 5. *sawm*: Abstaining from any eating, drinking, smoking or sexual activity from dawn to sunset, every day of the month of Ramadan. Fasting—as cited above—can also be voluntary.
 6. *zakah*: The obligatory sharing of wealth with the poor and the community at the yearly rate of 2.5% of appropriated wealth above a certain minimum. It also refers to general charity that is strongly encouraged by divine injunctions.

'*umrah*⁸, *dhikr*⁹ and loving conduct towards other people. The way and the degree to which such a person does these depend on a number of things including one's natural temperament, understanding and level of *imān*¹⁰. Moderation therefore covers a wide range of spiritual states.

According to a number of *ahādīth*¹¹, the Prophet (SAAS)¹² praised those who adopted a moderate approach to worship. Worship, he said, should be done with freshness of heart, not as an exhausting routine carried on in spite of fatigue. Therefore various provisions were made in the Qur'an and the Hadith to ease things—for travellers, for the sick, for pregnant or nursing women, for the old, for the poor, because "On no soul does Allah place a burden greater than it can bear". (Qur'an 2:286)

The word **moderate** is sometimes taken to mean 'only half-committed'. This is a mistake. A moderate may be just as deeply committed as an extremist, but they differ in the way they fulfil their commitment. Moderation is therefore not a matter of commitment to Islam or lack of it, but of how to practice Islam, how to interpret and apply its teachings, how to relate to other people and how to go about calling other people to the truth.

If I look back to the first decade that I spent in Nigeria, from 1966 to 1976, I was struck by the high level of tolerance on the

7. *hajj*: The fifth pillar of Islam consisting of acts performed at Makkah on the ninth and tenth days of Dhū al Ḥijjah, the last month of the Islamic lunar year.

8. '*umrah*: A minor pilgrimage to Makkah, which does not count towards fulfillment of the hajj, may be made at any time.

9. *dhikr*: The remembrance of Allah (SWT), or His presence in the consciousness of mankind.

10. *imān*: The conviction or certainty, that Allah is indeed the one and only God and that Muhammad is His last prophet.

11. *hadith* (Pl. *ahādīth*): The verbalized form of a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) constitutive of his Sunnah.

12. SAAS—*Salla Allāhu 'Alayhi was Sallam*: May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him; said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned, or whenever he is referred to as the Prophet of Allah.

part of the Muslims—a tolerance that seemed sometimes to stem from a simple and trusting nature. Students in schools were still generally being taught their religion by traditional Mallams. Islam meant how to perform prayers, the rules of fasting, memorization of the Qur'an and so on. Christians were a minority who posed little threat and they enjoyed much tolerance from the Muslims. Within a decade the situation began to change. Students now began to get their knowledge of Islam from a variety of sources: young trained teachers, a variety of books in English, and a great number of magazines and newspaper articles. They also began to follow Islamic programmes on the radio and television, some of which were well-informed, some not. In addition they learned from lectures and camps organized by Islamic groups and organizations, who would invite anyone with Islamic interest to give lectures. Many young students themselves gave lectures and conducted group studies of the Qur'an and Hadith. This has continued to be the common pattern of learning to this day. It is the age of the amateur in Islamic Studies and anyone can stand up and have a go, even those with very limited knowledge. Obviously this is the result, in many Muslim countries, of the imposed secularization of education by an elite dedicated to promoting ideas and theories incompatible with the Islamic worldview.

The outcome of this has its good and its bad side. On the good side, young Muslims have come to realize that Islam is not just prayers, fasting and memorization of the Qur'an. They have a much broader idea of the implications of Islam as a way of life, together with its social, economic and political teachings. The interest generated by these discoveries has brought about a re-awakening among young Muslims, and many of them, with the enthusiasm and the dedication of youth, have identified themselves with the Islamic cause and tried to conduct their lives on Islamic principles. Many naturally aspire for an Islamic form of government based on the Shari'ah¹³ as existed before the colonial era. At the same time they have become much more aware of the

13 Shari'ah: The collective name for all the laws of Islam, including Islam's whole religious and liturgical, ethical and jurisprudential systems.

political, cultural and even religious efforts by foreign powers to undermine Islam and the Shari'ah.

But the re-awakening also has its dangerous side. Students have become confused and often divided through being exposed to such a variety of information and views from so many different sources. Young Muslims with poor standards of general education and no firm grounding in Islam can hardly be expected to possess a clear judgement with which to assess what they read or are told about Islam. Consequently they can be easily led, by those who pose to have knowledge, to take up positions of extremism and intolerance towards fellow Muslims who might not conform to their newly-acquired concept of Islam. Those Muslims who do not hold the same idea or possess the same fervour could be regarded as 'modern Muslims', hypocrites or even unbelievers, instead of brothers and sisters sharing the same faith.

And who could blame the youth for dividing themselves and taking extreme positions when they could see some of their elders doing the same thing over other issues.

What then is meant by extremism? It is important to be clear about the definition because the word is often used improperly to describe anyone who is committed to following the basic and well-known teachings of Islam. Al Qaradawi writes:

Literally, extremism means being situated at the farthest possible point from the centre. Figuratively, it indicates a similar remoteness in religion and thought, as well as behavior. One of the main consequences of extremism is exposure to danger and insecurity. Islam therefore recommends moderation and balance in everything: in belief, 'ibadah, conduct and legislation. This is the straightforward path that Allah (SWT) calls *al ṣirāt al mustaqīm*; one distinct from all others which are followed by those who earn Allah's anger and those who go astray. Moderation, or balance, is not only a general characteristic of Islam, it is a fundamental landmark. The Qur'an says: "Thus have we made of you an

Islamic texts call upon Muslims to exercise moderation and to reject and oppose all kinds of extremism: *ghuluw* (excessiveness) and *tashdid* (bigotry). For example, the Prophet is reported to have said:

Beware of excessiveness in religion. [People] before you have perished as a result of [such] excessiveness.¹⁵

In other words excess may eventually develop into a larger problem and even become a threat to the well-being and security of the Ummah—indeed, in the same way as laxity can do.

According to another hadith, the Prophet said: "Ruined were those who indulged in hair-splitting"¹⁶, and he repeated it three times. Imam Al Nawawi commented that this referred to those who were excessive in utterance and action, resulting in loss in this life and the Hereafter.

According to other *aḥādīth*, the Prophet said:

Verily this religion is easy, and none shall be severe in religion but it will overcome him: he shall turn it into a stone and make it a tomb.¹⁷

Do not overburden yourselves, lest you perish. People [before you] overburdened themselves and perished. Their remains are found in hermitages and monasteries.¹⁸

The Prophet always resisted any tendency towards religious excess, even in *'ibādah*¹⁹. Numerous *aḥādīth* testify to this. Islam seeks to create a balance between the needs of the body and those of the soul, between this world and the hereafter, between

14 *Id*, p.21

15 Reported by Ahmad, Nasa'i and Ibn Majah.

16 Reported by Muslim.

17 Reported by Bukhari.

18 Reported by Muslim and Abu Dawud.

19 *'ibādah*: The act or action of serving God.

the right of man to live life to its full, and his duty to worship and obey his Creator.

The various forms of *'ibādah* in Islam purify the soul and establish harmony and brotherhood in the community, without hindering the building of culture and civilization. Muslims are to pray for "the good of this world and the good in the Hereafter." (Qur'an 2:201).

If Allah does not wish us to be extreme in our worship of Him—worship being the reason for our creation—there is no reason to believe that He wants us to be extreme in our conduct towards one another, or in other aspects of our life.

The Qur'an speaks of enjoyment of Life:

O children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer. Eat and drink, but waste not [by excess,] for Allah loves not those who waste. Say: who has forbidden the beautiful gifts of Allah which He has produced for His servants and the things clean and pure which He has provided for sustenance? (7:30-31)

In another verse it says:

O you who believe! Make not unlawful the good things Allah has made lawful to you. But commit no excess, for Allah does not like those given to excess. Eat of the things which Allah has provided you, lawful and good, but fear Allah, in Whom you believe. (4:86-88)

The Sunnah²⁰ emphasizes that people should give due right to their Lord, to themselves, to their families and to other people. All these warnings are necessary because there is something inherently wrong with excessiveness and extremism. Firstly, it is too repulsive for ordinary human nature to endure or tolerate. The majority could never put up with excessiveness, even if a few

20 Sunnah: With capital S, it means the path and example of the Prophet, consisting of all that he said, did, approved of or condemned. See also footnote 36.

could do so for a short time. The Shari'ah addresses the whole of humanity, not just a special group who have a unique capacity for endurance. Once Mu'adh ibn Jabal led *ṣalāh* and prolonged it, and some people complained to the Prophet. The Prophet said to him: "O Mu'adh! Are you putting the people on trial?" and repeated it three times.²¹

On another occasion he spoke with anger to an Imam, saying:

Some of you make people dislike to do good deeds [that is *ṣalāh*]. So whoever among you leads people in *ṣalāh* should shorten it because among them are the weak, the old and the one who has business to attend to.²²

When the Prophet sent Mu'adh and Abu Musa al Ash'ari to Yemen, he gave them the following advice: "Facilitate [religious matters to people] and do not make [things] difficult. Obey each other and do not differ [among yourselves]."²³

Secondly, excessiveness tends to be short-lived. Al Qaradawi says: "I have often met people who were known for their strictness and extremism; then I lost contact with them for a while. When I enquired about them after a period of time, I found out that they had either deviated or taken the opposite extreme, or at least lagged behind." ²⁴ So the Prophet said:

Do those deeds which you can do easily, as Allah will not get tired [of giving rewards] till you get bored and tired [of performing religious deeds]...and the most beloved deed to Allah is the one which is done regularly even if it were little.²⁵

The third defect of excessiveness is that it is often at someone else's expense—that is, someone else is likely to suffer neglect or inconvenience as a result of the extremist's preoccupation with

21 Reported by Bukhari.

22 Reported by Bukhari.

23 Reported by Bukhari and Muslim.

24 *Id*, p.26.

25 Reported by Bukhari and Muslim.

doing more than others.

If extremism refers to whatever is furthest from the center or the middle course, and is condemned in the Qur'an and by the Prophet, it is important to distinguish where the middle course lies and where the extreme lies. People's perceptions of this are bound to differ. Obviously, personal piety, family background and the environment affect our perceptions of what is extreme, moderate or lax.

For example, people brought up in a strict Muslim environment tend to regard any deviation with horror and aversion. At the other extreme are some whose background is so un-Islamic that they regard even minimal adherence to Islam as a kind of extremism. They express surprise at someone who performs *ṣalāh* five times a day, cast doubt over what is clearly *ḥarām*²⁶, and even regard the wearing of *ḥijāb*²⁷ as an act of extremism, fanaticism and backwardness.

Manifestations of Extremism

The manifestations of what could clearly be identified as extremism are numerous. The following are among them:

1. **Bigotry:** The extremist believes that he is right and cannot be wrong. He regards anyone who differs from him as an enemy or at best an ignorant person. He cannot tolerate differences of opinion. Al Qaradawi remarks:

The issue becomes even more critical when such a person develops a tendency to coerce others, not necessarily physically but by accusing them of *bid'ah*²⁸, laxity, *kufṛ*²⁹

26 *ḥarām* (pl. *muḥarramāt*): That which Allah has explicitly forbidden humans to do and for which He specified a penalty.

27 *ḥijāb*: The Islamic style of dress for women.

28 *bid'ah*: Condemned innovation.

29 *kufṛ*: The act of declaring solemnly one's disbelief. See footnote 31.

and deviation. Such intellectual terrorism is as terrifying as physical terrorism.³⁰

2. **Excessiveness in all things:** The extremist is committed to excessiveness and attempts to force others to do likewise, despite good reasons for Islam having made things easy. As the Qur'an says: "Allah intends every facility for you: He does not want to put you in difficulties." (2:185)
3. **Sternness without consideration of time or place:** Examples include causing difficulties for converts in non-Islamic societies and pursuing controversies over such matters as dress, sitting on the floor instead of on chairs, eating on the floor, eating without cutlery and so on, all the while insisting that everyone must comply with their wish. Ironically, those who initiate and sustain such bitter controversies over matters of detail are often neglectful of essential religious duties to their parents, wives, children and neighbours.
4. **Linked to this is ill-mannered treatment of people, and a crude approach to calling people to Islam—which generally serves to frighten them away rather than draw them closer.**
5. **Suspicion:** Contrary to the spirit and teachings of Islam which encourage Muslims to think well of others, the extremist is always ready to accuse people and jump to conclusions of guilt the moment he suspects a person of anything. If anyone tries to state a moderate and authentically Islamic position, the extremist accuses him of transgression, laxity, westernization, disrespect for the Sunnah, or even unbelief. Allah says:

O you who believe! Avoid suspicion as much [as possible], for suspicion in some cases is a sin. (49:12).

30 *LA*, p.34.

Such suspicion is related to pride, the first act of disobedience of Satan who claimed: "I am better than he is." (38:76)

Causes of Extremism

Extremism does not originate by chance. It should be realized that such a complex phenomenon has numerous causes, both direct and indirect, some recent and some going far back in time.

- 1- The first cause of extremism is **lack of knowledge** of and insight into the underlying purposes, spirit and essence of faith. Some extremists who claim to be versed in Shar'iah lose sight of the underlying purpose and essence of Islam. They insist on total literal application of certain *ahādīth* without consideration of the circumstances in the contemporary world under which they are applied.

Shaikh al Qaradawi gives several examples of this. One is the hadith in which the Prophet advised against carrying a copy of the Qur'an into the land of the *kuffār*³¹. If we look at the reason underlying this prohibition, we conclude that it was his concern that in the war-situation of the time, the *kuffār* might desecrate or harm the Qur'an if it fell into their hands. This is not normally the situation nowadays—Muslims travel all over the world carrying their Qur'an for personal reading without fear of desecration. Moreover, availability of the Qur'an in many languages is nowadays an important part of *da'wah* in many non-Muslim countries, and a cause of their people embracing Islam.

31 *kāfir* (pl. *kuffār* or *kāfirān*): The person guilty of declaring solemnly his/her disbelief (*kufr*). To say solemnly that Allah is not God, or is not the subject of each of His attributes, or that Muhammad is not His Prophet, or that anything in the Qur'an is not verbatim truth or revelation from Allah. See footnote 29.

ON THIS BOOK

Although this is a very important issue for us Muslims to address, paradoxically, it is an issue we seldom address. Why is it so important, and why do we seldom address it? It is important because it affects our relationship with one another as well as with non-Muslims, and thus the spread of Islam—all crucial concerns for the future of the Ummah. Why then do we seldom speak about it? Because to do so is to run the risk of being abused, misunderstood and quoted out of context by people who cannot tolerate any opinion other than their own, even if that other opinion has a sound basis in Islamic teachings.

Brief as it may appear, and dealing with such a topical subject, this book is quite comprehensive. The author shows motives which produce the lax and the extremist types of people. Speaking the language of *hikmah*, but making use of cogent arguments, she addresses committed Muslim youth with an open mind and suggests wise and efficient solutions to remedy laxity and extremism in society.

Easy to read, brief, balanced and enjoyable, this book is the first of its category to deal with the burning issues of laxity, moderation and extremism. It is a must for and a companion to every responsible Muslim involved in da'wah work.

Even non-Muslims, can greatly benefit from such illuminating insights on what a true Muslim's attitude should be when fulfilling his obligation of transmitting the Divine message to his fellow human beings.



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