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JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

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The Principle of *Wasaṭiyyah* (Moderation) and the Social Concept of Islam: Countering Extremism in Religion

Haslina Ibrahim[*]

Abstract

This paper discusses the principle of moderation (an aspect of *al-wasaṭiyyah*) in the social concept of Islam, alongside *Zhōngyōng* (中庸), a similar concept that reflects the idea of moderation in Confucianism. The author emphasises on the concept of moderation in both traditions as a feasible platform to combat extremism in multi-religious and multi-racial societies. The author employs a qualitative methodology through which descriptive, comparative and textual analyses are applied on written materials related to the subject matter. Findings reveal that scholars of both traditions thoroughly deliberate the concepts in their discourses. Some of the shared universal values, such as justice, equilibrium, and forbearance can be found in both traditions and are useful in de-radicalizing potential and existing extremists.
Keywords: Moderation, *wasaṭiyyah*, *zhōngyōng*, extremism, Islam, Confucianism

Introduction

Moderation is one of the universal values shared by most tradition and religion. Literally it refers to the idea of a middle position between two opposites or two extremes. The Arabic dictionaries refer it as justice (*al-ʿadl*), balance, merit or excellence (*al-faḍl*), better (al-*khayriyyah*) and median (*al-baynaniyah*).[1]

The more accurate word for moderation in Arabic is *wasaṭiyyah*. The antonym is *tatarruf* which means inclination toward the peripheries', 'extremism', 'radicalism' and 'excess'.[2] The term *wasaṭiyyah* is derived from the Qurʾān in surah al-Baqarah verse 143 as

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[1]Tazul Islam and Amina Khatun, '"Islamic Moderation" in Perspectives: A Comparison Between Oriental And Occidental Scholarships', 71, accessed 26 September 2017.
http://www.academia.edu/download/45990871/2015_islamic_moderation_in_perspective_A_Comparison_Between_Oriental_And_Occidental_Scholarships.pdf.

[2] Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qurʾānic Principle of Wasaṭiyyah* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.9.

Allah characterized the Muslim ummah as *ummatan wasaṭan.* The Muslim ummah is aspired to be the middle *ummah* due to its credibility in becoming a witness over the nations. The Muslim exegetes have offered numerous interpretations over the meaning of *ummatan wasaṭan* and majority of them interpreted *wasaṭan* implicates the meaning of fairness.[1] Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī defined it as the justly-balanced way or equilibrium (*al-tawāzun*). He in fact offered a more comprehensive yet a heavy loaded meaning of moderation in his work titled *Al-Khaṣā'iṣ al-'Āmmah li al-Islām.*[2] Kamal Hasan in citing al-Qaraḍāwī's definition deliberated that moderation as taught in Islam encompasses many qualities. It embodies the idea of justice (*al-'adl*), straightness *(al-istiqāmah*), goodness (*al-khayriyyah*), safety (*al-amn*), strength (*al-quwwah*), and unity (*al-waḥdah*).[3]

It is interesting to learn that the concept of moderation is prevalent among some thinkers and religious scholars. Confucius introduced the idea of the Golden Mean (*Zhōngyōng*) and it has been attributed in one of the four books of the Confucian philosophy. It is reported that Confucius said "the virtue embodied in the doctrine of the mean is of the highest order. But it has long been rare among people." (Analects, 6:29). Aristotle promotes the idea of the middle state of the soul in *Eudaimonean Ethics* for it is the state according to him that generates virtues in human behavior. Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Miskawayh seemed to echo the Aristotelian ethics as they concentrated on the role of the soul and its struggle for the middle position in order to maintain balance in human character. Last but not least, Siddartha Gautama Buddha spoke of the Middle Way, a path that relieves man from extreme asceticism and self-indulgence. Buddhism teaches it followers to be moderate in understanding, thought, action, speech, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.

Having given the above examples this paper looks forward to discuss the concept of moderation and how it pertains to Islam and Confucianism in general. The issue of moderation has been chosen in order to counter the pressing issue today, which is extremism. This is crucial since at present,

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[1]Mohd Shukri Hanapi, "The Wasaṭiyyah (Moderation) Concept in Islamic Epistemology: A Case Study of Its Implementation in Malaysia," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4, no. 9, accessed 2014, <<http://www.academia.edu/download/36347000/14IJHSS_V4N9_JULAI_2_.pdf>>.

[2]Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *Al-Khasais Al-'Ammah Lil-Islam*, second (Beirut, Lubnan: Muassasah al-Risalah, 1983).

[3]M. Kamal Hassan, *Voice of Islamic Moderation From the Malay World*, First Edition (Perak, Malaysia: Emerging Markets Innovative Research, 2011), 162–65. Also see Al-Qaraḍāwī, *Al-Khaṣā'iṣ al- 'Āmmah Li al-Islām*.

religion and tradition have been accused for hosting the idea of extremism and held responsible for infusing its' idea to the extremist followers.

The Concept of *Ummatan Wasaṭan* (Moderate Ummah): An Antithesis of Extremism

The principle of moderation in Islam is fundamentally aspired by the phrase *ummatan wasaṭan* in surah al-Baqarah verse 143.

The verse cited above was revealed in appreciation of Prophet Muhammad and his followers for taking the instruction from Allah with sense of obedience; the changing of *qiblah* (prayer direction) from Bayt al-Maqdis to Bayt Allāh in Mecca. The shift of *qiblah* may seem to be an easy instruction to comply with. However, a more profound study of its narrative unfolds the dilemma entailing from the instruction. Bayt al-Maqdis epitomizes the crux of the teaching of the prophets before Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to whom the latter attested to. The shift direction to Bayt Allāh, was controversial since it has become a commercial center along with polytheistic embellishment and festivals. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) and his companions could have resisted the instruction if they took Bayt al-Maqdis and Bayt Allāh in literal sense. Such a resistance did not take place because faith in God has nurtured in them the sense of moderation that they refrain from being a literalist and bias towards or against certain race and place.

In the spirit of the verse cited, it is noteworthy to point out that Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) and his companions dismissed their sentiment and took up the instruction. In reality, facing Bayt Allah was not easy for they have been mistreated by the Meccan community and they were made to leave Mecca when the oppression against them escalated. In addition, Bayt al-Maqdis of Jerusalem reconnect them to the monotheistic religions of the earlier prophets whereas Bayt Allah of Mecca has turned into a hub of polytheistic beliefs and malpractices. If it was not because of moderation, the Muslims would have insisted Bayt al-Maqdis and declined the shift of *qiblah* to Bayt Allah.

Moderation as the antithesis of extremism is an ideal loaded with practical meanings. Hence, moderation is ideally imbued in the Islamic belief, worship, conduct and legislation.[1] In terms of faith, Islam takes the middle way between literalism and liberalism. Thus there should not be pure dogmatism nor total relativism in the understanding of religious

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[1] Yūsuf Al-Qaraḍāwī, *Islamic Awakening Between Rejection and Extremism* (Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991), p.9.

creeds. With regard to the laws, Islam takes a middle approach between extreme legalism and extreme spiritualism. Therefore, law is needed but it is not the ultimate tool in educating the society. In anyway spirituality helps to alleviate human conscientious but to expect that every single man to become a purely ascetic is naive. Finally, when it comes to ethics Islam acknowledges that man is not purely angelic nor purely evil hence it pardons mistakes and offers ways of relieving oneself from evil temptation.

The phrase *ummatan wasaṭan* appears to be a simple principle set up by God but it was a great challenge to the community at the time it was revealed as well as at present. The principle is supposed to inspire the Muslims in general to embrace the attributes of moderation that makes them outstanding in faith and morality so they can be emulated. Despite its simple connotation, *wasaṭiyyah* covers some degree of abstraction between the two extreme positions; deficiency and excessiveness. Hence ascertaining and maintaining a balance between the two extreme positions requires certain degree of flexibility under the guide of faith, reasoning and personal wisdom. Would reasoning alone be an adequate guide? Here lies the dilemma for there are people who make choices in life based on their understanding of moderation. On the other hand, there are also people who acted in certain ways thinking that they are fulfilling religious obligation. That is the reason why moderation implies the idea of balance, justice and fairness even to the self. This as explicitly pronounce in one of the ḥadīth of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as he acknowledged that he is the prophet who prays during the night and sleeps, worships God and works to earn for his living, studies religion and get married, fasts and breaks his fast.
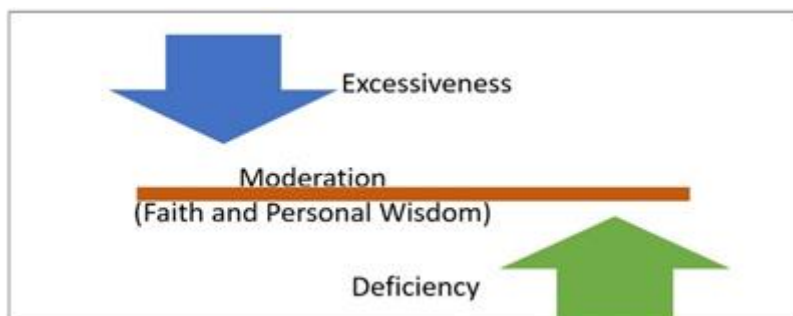
The concept of moderation as imbued in the phrase *ummatan wasaṭan* therefore, more than an ideal is operational and it refers to a continuous process. Hence, social solidarity in Islam implies a dynamic

rather than a static standard of ideals. It gives the general framework for the society with certain flexibility but it is guided by faith and personal wisdom. Because it is operational, continuous, dynamic and flexible, it means that *ummatan wasaṭan* of the Muslim society goes beyond an ideal or a utopian concept and objective. Rather, it aspires for a perpetual attempt to realizing its noble meaning.

The Concept of Moderation in the Different Religions and Tradition
Within the Muslim tradition, the concept of moderation has been given special attention by Muslim philosophers and Sufi masters; Ibn Miskawayh and al-Ghazālī. Both scholars wrote extensively on the concept of human soul its relation with human character. They exerted that a moderate state of the soul would produce justice hence the perfection of human character. They named the soul based on its functions and faculties; *al-nafs, al-rūḥ, al-ʿaql, al-qalb*. The soul has four faculties which are rational, anger, desire and justice. The first three faculties should be in moderate condition so they may produce wisdom (*al-ḥikmah*), courage (*al-shajāʿah*) and temperance (*ʿiffah*). Justice (*al-ʿadālah*) will only prevail when all the three faculties are under moderate condition. The faculty of justice (*al-ʿadl*) is the end of virtue and as a matter of fact, the whole of virtue.[1]

Ibn Miskawayh and al-Ghazālī's philosophy of ethics is rooted in the concept of human soul (*nafs al-insān*). The human soul is like a seed that grows in a garden. The seed determines the attributes of the plant. The wonder of the garden is made up by its vegetation that lives in coexistence. Thus, ideally, the human social wellbeing is intertwined with every single soul's wellbeing. Practically, the more people with moderate soul the more likelihood that the society develops its moderate attribute hence the prevalence of justice in an individual as well as in the society.

Long before Ibn Miskawayh (d.1030 C.E) and al-Ghazālī (d.1111 C.E), Plato (d.348 B.C.E) and Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.E) have also developed their theories of human soul. In fact, Ibn Miskawayh's ethics has been regarded the fusion of Platonic and Aristotelian ethical doctrine.[2] It was also claimed that Ibn Miskawayh work titled *The Refinement of Character* illustrates the influence of Plato's theory of justice and Aristotelian social concept in the Nichomachean Ethics.[3] The

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[1] Yasin Mohamed and others, 'Greek Thought in Arab Ethics: Miskawayh's Theory of Justice', 2000, 242, http://www.repository.up.ac.za/handle/2263/11435.

[2] Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1994), 6.

[3] Mohamed and others, 'Greek Thought in Arab Ethics', p. 242.

three tripartite soul; the rational (*al-ʿaql*), the anger (*al-qalb*) and the desire (*al-nafs*) if maintained at a balance position will produce the virtues of wisdom (*al-ḥikmah*), courage (*al-shajāʿah*) and temperance (*al-ʿiffah*). The fourth faculty, which is justice (*al-ʿadālah*) is the final outcome and the end of these virtues. Virtue therefore is a mean between the extreme of vices.[1] The faculty of justice however is the whole virtue. Therefore injustice is not a component but the whole of vice.

Faculty	Excessive	Moderation	Insufficiency
Rational Faculty (Intellect)	Deceit and fraud	Wisdom	Naivety Ignorance
Appetitive Faculty (Desires)	Strong desire, greed	Temperance	Impotence of desires, indifference
Irascible Faculty (Anger)	Recklessness	Courage	Cowardice
Justice	Injustice	Justice	Injustice

The concept of moderation can also be found in the Confucius ideas of the Golden Mean. It has been regarded one of his significant achievements that is worth of discussing.[2] Many interpretations of the Golden Mean have been offered by the neo-Confucian thinkers, however one of the best interpretations stipulates the meaning as "neither worry everything, nor enjoy everything; take the middle, namely worry in some cases (before the people), and enjoy in some cases (after the people)."[3] Another interpretation associates it with the ancient Greeks virtue under the name temperance.[4]

A translation of his work on the doctrine of the mean define the mean as the central ordinary practice" or "centrality" (*zhong* 中), or perhaps, "bring centered in ordinary practice (*yong* 庸). It is therefore interpreted that morality is a characteristic feature of ordinary, everyday spontaneity.

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[1] Ibid., p. 243.
[2] Fu Yuhua, 'Interpreting and Expanding Confucius' Golden Mean through Neutrosophic Tetrad', *Neutrosophic Sets and Systems*, 2015, 3.
<<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Surapati_Pramanik/publication/283545257_Neutrosophic_sets_and_System_Vol9_2015/links/563dff9508aec6f17dda82e4.pdf#page=4>>
[3] Ibid.
[4] Miles Menander Dawson and others, *The Conduct of Life: The Basic Thoughts of Confucius*, vol. 64 (Garden City publishing Company, Incorporated, 1941) p.64.

Therefore human ordinary experience, is the raw substance of the *Dao* 道 (way) rather than any elusive or esoteric wisdom.[1] In this regard, every man is capable of pursuing the path. As a matter of fact, the call to walk the *Dao* 道 (way) means to be "centered" in ordinary practice until death. So long that a person is committed to the center (practicing the mean) he complies with the virtues stipulated by Confucius. In addition, the path is common to everyone's experience that one is capable of pursuing it as a person with an ideal moral character; a *junzi* 君子 and centrality (*zhong* 中).[2] The essential of being a person with ideal moral character is because it is the only way that the person can be united with the creative flow of Nature (heaven and earth).[3]

The quality of man who walks on the path of the mean is further illustrated. He is a man of quick in apprehension, clear in discernment, far reaching intelligence, all embracing knowledge, fitted to exercise rule, magnanimous, generous, benign and mild, fitted to exercise forbearance; impulsive, energetic, firm and enduring, fitted to maintain a firm grasp; self-adjusted, grave, never swerving from the mean and correct, fitted to command reverence; accomplished, distinctive, concentrative, and searching, fitted to exercise discrimination; all-embracing, vast, deep, and active as a fountain, sending forth in their due seasons his virtues.[4]

In our humble attempt to articulate the Confucian ideas of the mean, we found that the doctrine is pregnant with meanings and his writing titled "The Doctrine of the Mean" has to a certain extent done justice in articulating the doctrine. One translation work of this writing however has rendered a great service in systemizing the Confucian ideas of the mean. The translation manage to summarize the core themes found in the work which includes the definition and meaning of the doctrine of the mean, the path (*Dao*) of the mean, the mean and filial piety, the mean and governance, the mean as the perfect virtue, the mean and the Nature, the mean, the virtue and the sages and the cosmic sage.[5] Despite its complex exposition Confucian's doctrine of the mean echo the idea of balance and fairness. Unlike the Muslims and the Greek scholars who deliberated on the concept of human soul to arrive at the idea of balance and fairness, Confucian took a different approach. His discussion of the mean is rather concrete and practical. In addition his doctrine of the mean cannot be read in isolation of his other writings especially the rest of the Analects.

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[1] Brian Eno, 'The Great Learning', *A Year with Swollen Appendices*, 1996, 22, http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Daxue-Zhongyong.pdf.

[2] Ibid., p. 23.

[3] 'Daxue-Zhongyong.Pdf', n.d., p. 22.

[4] Dawson and others, *The Conduct of Life*, 64:68–69.

[5] 'Daxue-Zhongyong.Pdf', p. 25.

Moderation A Universal Value Deserves A Global Campaign against Extremism

Moderation as one of the social concepts in Islam dismissed exclusivism that comes in the form of ethnocentrism, racism, tribalism and religious exclusivism. Fazlur Rahman regarded exclusivism in religion a form of polytheism for it casted the position of God to man and delimiting God's infinite mercy.[1] Indeed the concept of *ummatan wasaṭan;* the moderate community and the concept of moderate soul is complimenting each other in the realization of universal justice. Given that moderation is also a prevalent concept in other religions and tradition, it deserves a global recognition as a prime universal value.

In the context of Asean, such initiative has been materialized in April 2015. The Global Movement of Moderates at the 26th ASEAN Summit have endorsed the Langkawi Declaration that reinforcing moderation as an ASEAN value. The summit was attended by the Asean leaders ranging from the Heads of State/Government of the Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) from Australia, the People's Republic of China, Republic of India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and the United States of America. The summit endorses moderation as a universal value that promotes peace, security, development and social justice. The summit acknowledges that moderation is in fact the ancient wisdom that describes the middle way and the golden mean as a path of moderation, which emphasizes tolerance, understanding, dialogue, mutual respect and inclusiveness and is a tool to bridge differences and disputes.[2]

Since the 9/11 tragedy, extremism has become an alarming reality. Not only that it has created certain phobic and suspicion especially towards the Muslims, it has also negative implication on human perceptions towards religions in general. Hence there is a strong urge for people of religions to be liberated from 'religious dogma' and to resume taking religion and values in a secular manner. In reality, there are some overlapping concept in religions and one of them is the moderation concept. In fact, taking Islam and Confucianism as model, moderation has been regarded the highest virtue, the core of which justice and perfection prevail.

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[1] Fazlur Rahman, 'A Muslim Response: Christian Particularity and the Faith of Islam', in *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World* (New York: Orbis Book, 1978), 73.

[2] 'East Asia Summit Declaration On The Global Movement Of Moderates', accessed 26 September 2017,http://www.asean.org/storage/images/2015/November/10th-EAS Outcome/EAS%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Global%20Movement%20of%20Moderates.pdf.

Today as people of different religions, cultures and civilization are leaving together virtually or practically, any irregularity that is taking place in one part of the world would be felt by the global community. It is not a perfect timing to undertake the phrase 'an eye for an eye' as it open up the gate for more justifications to extremism. Therefore it is essential that the concept of moderation to be promoted at the local and global level in order to educate the society and to impart in them the knowledge, skill and art of living together.

Conclusion

Moderation being one of the key concepts in Islam provides an ideal and a practical solution for developing an individual personality as well as a controlling mechanism in the society. Alhough the concept found its origin in the Qur'ānic verse (*ummatan wasaṭan)*, it has also a profound philosophical exposition. The fact that moderation as a concept is found in other religions and traditions, it justifies the idea that moderation is in fact, a universal notion. Taking Islam and Confucianism as a model of comparison, it is learnt that much more can be researched and explored on moderation and its distinct meaning and philosophy in particular religion and tradition. If the call for common dialogue and values in religions is still a mere slogan, perhaps moderation can have the honor to be the leading theme. Hopefully, this humble initiative can be one of the tools to counter the misconception and allegation made against religion as the source of extremism.

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