

## ***Book Reviews***

**The middle path of moderation in Islam: The Qur’ānic principle of Wasaṭiyyah.** By Mohammad Hashim Kamali. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 320 pages, ISBN: 978-0-19-022683-1.

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When following news or articles about Islam, we often face people who use the words *jihād* and *sharīa* as though they possess a deep understanding of those subjects. These authors, usually non-Muslims, discuss deeply complex concepts while ignoring the Islamic perspective in their analysis. Obviously such views, as they are presented outside the complex thought process system from which they originate, are, at best, reductionist. All aspects relating to Islam must be properly sized, since each of them is subject to different readings and meanings, being themselves the result of a long process of reflections.

Within this multiplicity of interpretations and meanings, there is a concept whose relevance must be pointed out in order to bring to the fore groups larger and more relevant than the extremist elements within the Muslim world. This is the concept of ‘moderation’. In fact, this concept, *wasaṭiyyah*, is placed as being of central relevance to understanding this silent majority of Muslims. They are threatened by those who speak louder, but who definitely do not speak for the majority. The translation of *wasaṭiyyah* could be ‘moderation’, ‘parsimony’, or ‘temperance’. It is due to such diversity of translations that we choose not to translate such a term. This is also the motto of the book under review, Mohammad Hashim Kamali’s *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam: The Qur’ānic Principle of Wasaṭiyyah*.

Starting from investigations based mainly on the *Qur’ān*, the *ahādīth* (pl. of *ḥadīth*, records of the Prophet Muhammad validated by its *isnād*, or ‘chain’), the *sunnah* (biographical examples from the life of the Prophet Muhammad) and interpretations of Sunni and Shi’a

scholars, the author demonstrates how much the concept of *wasatīyyah* is fundamental to the understanding of Islam as well as Muslims. He shows that there are highly antagonistic or repressive readings of *jihād* and *sharīa*, demonstrating that such readings are inadequate to become the representative interpretations to the message of Islam. One thing that different Islamic denominations theorists commonly agree on is the need to move away from the ‘margins’ and ‘extremes’ of religion, and remain in a middle position. Exceeding those borders would incur misconceptions, and effectively take us away from the core of the faith.

Prefaced by Tariq Ramadan, the work is divided into two parts. In the first one, *Conceptual Analysis*, Kamali offers conceptual and thematic analyses about *wasatīyyah*, identifying it in the traditional Islamic sources, their definitions, and tangible results. He also identifies major contemporary movements that address this principle. In the second part, *Thematic Perspectives*, we are presented with studies that address issues from the environment to the status of women in the Muslim world, as well as an important reflection on Islam and modernity. The work is permeated by references to the *Qur’ān* that we deem very important to refute the notion that it is a violent or even intolerant book – cf. the work the *The Qur’an: A Biography* by Bruce Lawrence. On the contrary, Islam is presented as a faith which disavows extremism, which unfortunately is practiced by a tiny portion of the Muslim population, who are targeted for study by vested interests. Such extreme perspectives run contrary to teachings by Islamic sources that propagate tolerance, self-reflection, and dialogue.

One of the examples raised by Kamali in the book is the existence of different schools of Islamic jurisprudence (the *madāhib*, pl. of *madhab*). Such plurality of theological interpretations is inherent amongst the community of scholars in Islam, and this in itself is an acknowledgement, so to speak, of the fact that there is no single group with the monopoly of the ‘true reading’. The coexistence of plural visions and the assimilation of different influences in the development of schools reinforce the element of tolerance, and at the same time, internal cohesion in Islam. Agreement is also accompanied with disagreement, but not with repudiation of the other’s way of faith, unless such a way ends up precisely in extremism (or *ghulat*). The search for consensus through dialogue and exchange of knowledge is much more a basis for the *jihād* and *sharia*, for example, than the ideas of ‘holy war’

(incidentally, a Western term) and ‘totalitarian law’ respectively. The *wasatiyyah* refers to the practical wisdom that Muslims employ in their everyday relations with others. The excess of charity, for example, is highlighted as a problem; no one should harm his/her own family in order to donate to charity, just like the absence of charity is a problem: the essential is the median posture in charity, doing it in proper measure for each individual in his or her peculiar condition. Also, the waste (from natural resources, for example) and the illicit consumption should not be a practice, once they compromise the *wasatiyyah*.

One regularly quoted document is the Amman Message of 2005. In this document resides the mutual recognition of signatory Islamic groups, be it in their practices or readings. As a document about Sunni-Shiite dialogue, the Amman Message is an important lesson to learn, about how disputes between members of communities within Islam reflect more local and historical issues than fundamentally legitimate ones. It would be necessary to follow the principle of *wasatiyyah* to prevent the evils in this world; among such evils is the division of the Muslim *Ummah*.

At a time when all we hear in the news is about groups like Daesh (or ‘Islamic State’), Al-Qaeda, Taliban and other extremist Muslim groups, a work like this reflects how much the ignorance of the Islamic faith ultimately leads to generalizations and Islamophobic ideas that do not represent a faith practiced by more than one and a half billion people worldwide. Muslims generally live in societies with certain structures that, although passing through challenges brought by colonialism, produce scientific knowledge, technological advancements, as well as facilitate the spirit of cooperation, dialogue and tolerance. One of the manifestations of extremism that the author highlights is something practiced by extremist groups that were aforementioned: the ostentatious search for exposing the faults of others, judging and condemning people in this process, is contrary even to the coexistence based on mutual recognition. Even the gathering of Muslims with other people portrays the establishment of areas of intellectual, commercial and cultural exchanges; see, for example, the coexistence between Jews, Christians and Muslims in history.

This work, although focusing on fundamentals of Islamic studies, has been published in the Oxford University Press. This marks its

praiseworthiness, and is indicative of an important contribution towards dialogue being initiated by an Islamic scholar in pushing forward the cause of *wasatiyyah*. It is also an important contribution towards understanding and realising the same within the Muslim community. One of this work's merits is that it demonstrates how much terrorism is opposed to Islam, and how such association between Islam and terrorism keeps people away from the real knowledge of the religion. In fact, as a reminder, we should remember that the words 'peace' and 'submission' (to Allah) are translations of the word Islam.

In conclusion, Kamali presents a summary of ways to promote *wasatiyyah*; he highlights the value given to education, responsibility of the media, to combat social inequalities and to fight for peace. These are all elements that contribute to the promotion of plural and harmonious societies. In sum, the fight against ignorance is an endeavor which Muslims must actively participate in, both for the betterment of their own *Ummah* and for humanity.

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**The colour of inequality: Ethnicity, class, income and wealth in Malaysia. By Muhammed Abdul Khalid. Petaling Jaya: MPH Publishing, 2014, pp. 249, ISBN 978-9-6741-5214-7.**

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Since the financial crisis of 2008 and the 'Arab Spring' protests across the Middle East, growing levels of inequality have been one of the most hotly debated subjects globally. Muhammed Abdul Khalid's book *The Colour of Inequality: Ethnicity, Class, Income and Wealth in Malaysia* is an attempt to deconstruct the historical developments, determinants and distributions of inequality in Malaysia, paying particular attention to differences between the *Bumiputra* and non-*Bumiputra* races.

One of the key strengths of this book lies in the sheer amount of data presented. In a similar vein to Thomas Piketty's (2013) seminal work on global inequality, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Muhammed looks at historical data stretching back to the pre-colonial period in order

to paint a detailed picture of how economic inequality was embedded into the very social fabric of pre-independence Malaya and how various post-independence policies have attempted to address the issue. In this regard, the second chapter of the book is particularly impressive; it presents a remarkable amount of data of the historical developments of inequality in Malaysia, from the pre-colonial era till the present day, focusing on a wide range of indicators, including income, labour force participation, education status and asset accumulation.

Another key strength of this book is that the author uses a broader definition of inequality than simply looking at income, which constitutes only one facet of inequality. The other aspect of inequality lies in asset and wealth inequality. Most works discussing the subject will inevitably focus wholly or predominantly on income. This is because data for total assets held, or overall wealth, is much more difficult to get than that of income distributions. Therefore, the default subject of most studies has been income inequality. By using proxy data for asset allocation in Malaysia, Muhammed has been able to, to a certain extent, circumvent the limited access to data. While the data used does not allow for a very exact analysis, the result is still that this book can present a much broader picture of inequality than if income alone had been used.

The benefit of this focus on asset inequality is that the policy recommendations made can be much more far reaching than when only looking solely on income. The author uses this to his advantage by arguing for an overhaul to the current tax code in order to tax assets and capital gains – which will have a higher impact on the rich – and reduce the tax rate for lower-level income and goods and services – which will have an impact on the poorer segments of society.

The main issue of this book, however, lies in its poor editing. There are numerous cases of poor editing that, whilst not undermining the relevance of the book, severely impairs its readability. Such niggles include not specifying a parity value when referring to monetary values in US dollars. Further issues pertain to tables presenting data but where the variables are not fully explained. And, the book seems to be using both internal citations and footnotes simultaneously. Additionally, in chapter 5, there is a random paragraph on the lack of racial intermarriages at the end of a section discussing differences in educational attainment between the races. The paragraph appears out of the blue, and though it