The Threat from Extremism to Islam & the World – Usama Hasan

With the Name of Allah, All-Merciful, Most Merciful

THE THREAT FROM EXTREMISM TO ISLAM & THE WORLD

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1. Balance vs. Extremes: a Qur’anic Perspective

Islam, as revealed in the Qur’an and manifested by Muhammad, Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, is far more wide, deep and generous than is often currently found in the popular imagination and conception of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The Islam of the Qur’an and Sunnah is the Straight Path to God\(^1\); an outward path of personal devotion and social justice that reflects the inward state of the universe: created in the image of God, and hence reflecting the Divine names of Truth and Justice in the principle of cosmic harmony and balance.

We are told in the Qur’an, *Do they then seek for other than the Religion of God? – when to Him have submitted all creatures in the heavens and the earth, willingly and unwillingly, and to Him they shall be returned.*\(^2\)

Further, we are told: *And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance: in order that you may not transgress the Balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the Balance.*\(^3\)

Remaining in harmony with Nature and with our original selves is so important that one of the Qur’anic names for Islam is *Fitrah*\(^4\) – the original or primordial state of humanity, blessed with knowledge of the Divine Names and with the Spirit of God breathed into us.

Thus, any expression of true religion in the world must be one of justice, harmony and balance. Any imbalance or injustice leads to extremism and vice-versa: hence, the Qur’an warns the People of Scripture (*Ahl al-Kitab*)

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\(^1\) Qur’an, al-Hijr (The Rocky Tract), 15:41
\(^2\) Qur’an, Al ‘Imran (The Family of Imran), 3:83
\(^3\) Qur’an, al-Rahman (The Most Merciful), 55:7-9
\(^4\) Qur’an, al-Rum (The Roman Empire), 30:30
not to go to extremes in religion.\textsuperscript{5} Fittingly, this warning is given twice, perhaps indicating the reality that there always two extremes either side of every Golden Mean. For example, one of these verses warning against extremism goes on to affirm Jesus as Christ, Messenger and Word of God, neither an impostor nor God Himself.

The Qur’anic advice for living in the world is overwhelmingly one of keeping the balance, whilst always being devoted to God. So, we are encouraged, for example, to be neither miserly nor extravagant when spending\textsuperscript{6}, and to practice moderation in speech, including voice-levels in prayer\textsuperscript{7}, and even in our manner of walking.\textsuperscript{8} Islam comprises a balanced approach to doctrine and beliefs also: the example of Jesus Christ has already been cited. Further examples would include the belief in the Divine Decree, that should preclude despair at misfortune and arrogant celebration upon good fortune, as though one had earned such good fortune purely by oneself, without the Divine Grace.\textsuperscript{9}

Later Islamic texts on beliefs and creed such as that of Imam Tahawi would usually mention that the Islamic creed about the Decree avoided the extremes of both atheistic free-will and choice-denying determinism. Further, they would usually state that the Islamic teachings about God would avoid the extremes of the anthropomorphists who conceived of God as having a physical body, and of those who denied the Divine Names revealed in the Qur’an.

More generally, the path of Islam can be seen as a balance of the inward and outward. It is especially a harmony of Law and Spirit, between the extremes of spirit-less law and lawless spirit.

\section*{2. Balance vs. Extremes: The Way of the Prophet Muhammad}

Not only did the Messenger of Allah (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) live a full life of balance and harmony with creation in the Divine Presence, he repeatedly warned against the dangers of extremism and taught

\textsuperscript{5} Qur’an, al-Nisa’ (Women), 4:171 & al-Ma’idah (The Tablespread), 5:80
\textsuperscript{6} Qur’an, al-Isra’ (The Night Journey), 17:29 & al-Furqan (The Criterion), 25:67
\textsuperscript{7} Qur’an, al-Isra’ (The Night Journey), 17:110
\textsuperscript{8} Qur’an, Luqman, 31:19
\textsuperscript{9} Qur’an, al-Hadid (Iron), 57:22-23
practical steps that would guarantee a balanced spiritual life in this world and guard against destructive extremism. His Companions manifested this balance in their outlook and practice of Islam.

The following are some of the teachings of the Prophet that have been transmitted in this regard:

1. **Beware of extremism in religion, for it destroyed those before you.**

The Khawarij or Kharijis (Rebels) have been the most destructive and violent extremists throughout the history of Islam. They began at one extreme of intense love for the fourth caliph, Ali. Love then turned to hate and they rebelled against his authority, eventually murdering him. The Khawarij indulged in takfir (excommunication) of other Muslims, and later splintered repeatedly into dozens of sub-sects, each one of which would excommunicate all other Kharijis, never mind other Muslims! The theoretical excommunication has almost always been accompanied by violent rebellion or persecution. The same pattern is observed today with all extremist cults and sects, whether within Islam or other religions.

2. On the authority of Abu Hurayrah, who said: The Messenger of Allah (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) said, “*Truly, the religion is ease. Anyone who tries to outdo the religion in strictness, it will overcome him. So remain steadfast and be moderate, and seek help with journeys of the morning and evening and a part of the night.*”¹⁰

The eminent subcontinental scholar of hadith, ‘Abdul Ghaffar Hasan, explains this teaching by saying, “Just as a traveller does not travel continuously, but rather proceeds during mild and cool times, using the remainder of the time to rest himself and his mount, thus should be the traveller on the path of Islam. Taking upon oneself more difficulty than one can bear and emphasising voluntary actions in a way opposed to the Sunnah are all deeds that open the door to extremism in the religion. Anyone who gets caught up in extremism and excessiveness and then tries to wrestle with the religion does not harm the religion at all; rather, he has to retreat in the end.”

¹⁰ Bukhari (*Mishkat al-Masabih*, Book of Prayer, no. 1246)
Thus, Islam is again likened to a journey, a path to God. Travelling upon that journey has to be measured and balanced, like any terrestrial journey in our present earthly life.

3. Ruined are those who indulge in hair-splitting! Ruined are those who indulge in hair-splitting!

A famous incident from early Islamic history illustrates this teaching. Abdullah bin Umar was asked by a man about killing a mosquito. He asked, “From which people are you?” The man replied, “From the people of ‘Iraq.” He said, “Look at this one! He asks me about killing a mosquito, when they have killed (Husayn) the grandson of the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace)! I heard the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) saying, ‘These two (Hasan and Husayn) are my sweet-basils (i.e. perfumed flowers) in this world’.”\(^{11}\)

4. A moment, then another moment. (sa’ah wa sa’ah)\(^ {12}\)

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said this to his companion Hanzalah, who felt guilty and hypocritical because he experienced spiritual elevation in the mosque in the presence of the Prophet, but returned to his worldly ways with his family. The Prophet taught him that this was not hypocrisy, but simply the natural passage of time and spiritual states. This hadith is extremely important in keeping a balance in religion and avoiding extremism.

5. When you pray by yourself, lengthen your prayer as much as you wish. When you lead others in prayer, shorten your prayer as much as possible, for the elderly, the weak and those who have matters to attend to, they all follow you in prayer.\(^ {13}\)

In illustration of this principle, the Prophet’s prayer when he lead the community was relatively short without compromising the essential humility and stillness of prayer. By himself, he would often stand in prayer for most or all of the night. Furthermore, he famously rebuked his companion Mu’adh for leading very long night prayers that were too much of a strain on

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11 Bukhari (Mishkat al-Masabih, Book of Virtues, no. 6136)
12 Bukhari & Muslim
13 Bukhari & Muslim
his congregation, most of whom had been farming or shepherding their flocks of livestock all day.

An important extension of this Islamic teaching is that for someone serious about their religion and spirituality, they are entitled to impose a strict code upon themselves but must be generous and merciful towards others. Loss of this principle leads to imposing one’s own religious understanding upon others, another avenue to extremism.

3. Extremism as a Response to Modernity

The preceding Qur’anic principles and Prophetic guidance are very helpful in dealing with one of the most common causes of extremism: a phobia of modernity and its technology, especially when these are used for entertainment that may seem opposed to a life of worship.

Thus, throughout Muslim history, some jurists have opposed technological innovations such as the printing press, photography, television and sports, declaring these to be prohibited (haram). Similarly, in previous centuries in Europe, bishops preached against the evils of dance halls and later cinemas that were becoming more popular than the churches.

Considering more recent history, the rebels in Saudi Arabia led by Juhayman al-Utaybi who rose up against the government there in 1979 and barricaded themselves inside the Grand Mosque of Mecca, where known to be opposed, amongst other things, to the rising popularity of television and football in their country. During the 2006 football World Cup, extremists in Somalia burst into a cinema that was screening a live match and shot dead a number of innocent soccer fans.

Since 1997, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan have banned television, films and music and been known to take violent action against shops selling digital media products. The current civil war in the Swat valley of Pakistan, plus the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, illustrates the threat posed by extremist interpretations, not only to Islam but to the whole world.
4. A Balance between Worship and Relaxation

Such extreme reactions against forms of entertainment are a loss of balance and cause psychological and spiritual crises – a feature of cults that defame and destroy true religion. Islam encourages entertainment in moderation – as one of the early authorities remarked, “The soul needs a rest just as the body does.”

Thus, the Prophet occasionally listened to poetry and even quoted it, although his status as Prophet was too exalted for him to be described as a poet, an ascription that the Qur’an categorically denies. Furthermore, whilst some of his Companions such as Abu Bakr rarely composed poetry, others such as Hassan bin Thabit and Abdullah bin Rawaha mastered it and were employed by the Prophet in psychological warfare to accompany the military responses to his enemies. The Prophet famously observed that there is wisdom to be found in poetry, but cautioned against filling one’s heart and mind with it, since that would detract from prayer and the remembrance of God.

Similarly, the Prophet would often smile, laugh modestly and joke with his companions. However, he cautioned against excessive laughter, for it “kills the heart,”14 and leads to a frivolous approach to life and one’s responsibilities. He even occasionally listened to music and singing and recommended these in moderations for joyous occasions such as weddings and two Eid celebrations. None of this detracted from his constant devotion to God, his sense of the sacred in all of creation and his sense of responsibility in serving God’s creatures.

This example was followed by the Prophet’s companions. For example, Abul-Darda’ said, “I strengthen myself for a night of worship with an hour of entertainment.” An eyewitness reported that “The Companions of the Messenger of Allah (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) were neither dry-natured nor morbid. They would chant poetry to each other in their gatherings, and mention some of the matters of their Days of Ignorance (Jahiliyyah). However, if any of them was asked to do something against the command of Allah, the pupils of his eyes would revolve as though he were mad.”15

14 Ibn Majah
15 Bukhari, al-Adab al-Mufrad, Chapter: Pride, Hadith no. 555
In contrast, a lack of humour and insensitivity to cultural elegance is a characteristic of religious extremism that is dangerous to human psychology and spirituality.

A balanced approach to matters of culture and entertainment may be illustrated by an autobiographical anecdote from the Sufi master Ali al-Hujwiri: he recounts that during his youth, one of his shaykhs once asked him what he desired. Hujwiri replied that at that moment he desired to listen to music and singing. The shaykh called for some musicians who entertained the young man to his heart’s content. The shaykh then said to Hujwiri that there would come a time in his spiritual development when such music would seem to him to be no more “than the crowing of a crow.”

Religious and spiritual teachers should pursue such an approach to matters, especially with young people: their spiritual development should be encouraged, which will automatically lead to more ascetic lives – a spirituality that lives in the world without being consumed by worldliness. However, forcing one’s own religious and moral codes upon others when they are not prepared for these, is highly problematic.

5. Dealing with Extremism

5.1. Dialogue before military action

The original “violent extremists,” i.e. the Khawarij, have already been mentioned. It is worth noting that the fourth caliph of Islam, Ali bin Abi Talib, pursued military action against them only after exhausting all efforts at dialogue and reconciliation. In a famous political move, he sent Abdullah bin Abbas, a cousin of both Ali and the Prophet, known for his insightful understanding of the Qur’an and Islamic law, to debate with the rebels. His skilful presentation of arguments led to a third of the six-thousand-strong rebel army defecting to the side of the majority Muslim community.

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This has remained the first choice of traditional Muslim responses to armed, rebellious extremism, with military action being a last resort. In our times since the events of 9/11, dialogue with extremists has been successfully pursued in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Egypt, with a number of high-profile extremist preachers abandoning their dangerous path and recanting in public, with a powerful effect upon many of their former followers.

5.2. Justice and respect for human rights

As stated earlier, extremism is opposed to justice and therefore leads to injustice. The converse is also true: injustice and oppression can lead to a reactionary extremism.

For example, it is generally accepted that the practice of torturing suspects accused of belonging to extremist groups in Egyptian prisons in the second half of the twentieth century only resulted in more extremism and a greater danger to Egyptian society, with jihadi terrorism continuing for decades.

Similarly, President Obama declared in May 2009 that the existence of Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay had become a recruiting cry for extremists such as al-Qaeda, and was thus counter-productive.

Another example is that the longer justice is denied to the Palestinian people, the greater the likelihood of extremism in the region. As long as a viable, independent Palestinian state does not exist, religious and political extremism is likely to continue in the Middle East.

Thus, as part of any global struggle against extremism, Arab and Muslim governments must end all cruel treatment and torture of prisoners, whose basic human rights must be respected. The US must likewise live up to President Obama’s promise that his country “will not torture,” whether in the US or in secret locations around the world. The UK government must likewise ensure that it does not support the outsourcing of torture to non-Western governments and that it is not complicit in practices such as “extraordinary rendition.”
5.3. *Respect for faith in public life*

The world faces two extremes here, between those who wish to set up narrow-minded, theocratic “nanny states” and those who advocate a militant, anti-religious secularism that unjustly represses the public expression of faith. In multi-cultural and multi-religious societies, we need the rule of just laws that treat all citizens equally whilst maintaining respect for shared human values and spirituality in the public space.

6. **Conclusion**

The human condition is such that all aspects of it, including faith and religion, are liable to extremist distortions. However, cures and antidotes to such problems are also available, especially in the scriptural teachings of Islam. Religious communities, governments and civil society groups need to draw on such resources and work together to defeat the scourge of extremism and restore a sense of balance to our private and public manifestations of faith in God.