

BETWEEN MODERATION AND EXTREMISM:

**WASATIYYAH
AS THE
PEACE SOLUTION**

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NASHARUDIN MAT ISA

First Published 2013

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Title:

Between Moderation And Extremism: Wasatiyyah As The Peace Solution

ISBN:

978-967-0581-11-8

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Published By:

Institut Wasatiyyah Malaysia,
Jabatan Perdana Menteri,
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Layout & Printed By:

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FOREWORD

Alhamdulillah, I would like to express our deepest gratitude to Allah the Almighty for His blessing which made the publication of this monograph entitled : **“Between Moderation and Extremism: Wasatiyyah As the Peace Solution”** written by Nasharudin Mat Isa a success.

Indeed, this publication shows the continuous efforts by the Malaysian Institute of Wasatiyyah in promoting moderation, balance and justice as the essences of wasatiyyah approach to all levels of community in order to establish peace and harmony. The development of a harmonious Malaysian society is a long journey process that requires support and commitment from all levels of community regardless of their belief, culture and social status. It is worth to mention that a

society that practices wasatiyyah in their thinking and actions will have a high level of tolerance and acceptance. The differences between them will no longer be the reason for disunity and disharmony.

It is hoped that this publication will be useful in building a wasatiyyah-minded generation that put the importance of development of a harmonious community as one of their priority.

HAJI MOHD YUSOF BIN DIN

Director

Malaysian Institute of Wasatiyyah.

PREFACE

In the Name of Allah, The Most Beneficent and Most Merciful. Verily, there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad (P.B.U.H) is the Messenger of Allah, and our salutations to our Prophet (P.B.U.H) who is the last and final Messenger.

The impetus for this book – of which I consider a small contribution towards the understanding of the *wasatiyyah* concept – comes in light of the current situation wherein Islam is oft-portrayed negatively, more so than ever before. In addition to the misconception of Islam being extremist, intolerant and outdated by many, the subsequent threats of pluralism and liberalism makes it even more important and urgent, for a clear dissemination and understanding on the concept of *wasatiyyah*. The beauty of Islam lies in its moderation and just ruling of the human

condition and life, hence the need to clearly articulate and propagate the word of Islam in its proper glory.

This book is a small compilation of my thoughts and writings – past and present – which I hope will help in providing a clear idea on Islam and how the concept of *wasatiyyah* can help the Muslim *ummah* out of its current quagmire. I pray that this small contribution of mine may help in not only promoting Islam and its splendour, but to provide a clear and correct understanding on Islam and the *wasatiyyah* concept.

Last but not least, I would also like to express my deepest appreciation to *Institut Wasatiyyah Malaysia* (IWM) for the opportunity to collaborate and for the publishing of this book. I wish the Institute all the best in its future endeavours and

look forward to seeing it prosper locally and internationally.

May Allah's peace and blessing be upon us all.
Amin.

Regards,

NASHARUDIN MAT ISA

Challenges of Modern World Today

Firstly, let us be very clear on one single point i.e. extremism exists within all sectors of life and such psychotic behavioural nature could be further enhanced or more distinct among practitioners of cults and religions of the world. We are saying that extremists do exist among Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and others and they are spread all over the continents of the world, waiting for the correct time to strike.....

Admittedly, September 11, 2001 managed to change the world's perspective towards Islam, the Muslim World and the whole world by itself in general. Ever since, it was recorded that Muslims generally being treated "unfairly", "unequally" and "differently" throughout the

world.¹ Bombings in Jakarta, Moscow, Ankara, Riyadh and all other parts of the world have been connected to various “Muslim terrorist groups” without solid evidence and legitimate proofs whatsoever that causes America to increase its homeland security each day. No matter how hard the Muslim scholars *and* intellectuals tried to defend Islam, the more the pressure emplaced by America and its partners to scare and disseminate fear among Muslim countries especially the Middle East, of terrorism and its impact although until to-date, not a single weapon of mass destruction (WMD) has ever been found in Iraq – the reason that President Bush rallied the whole world to declare war against Iraq then!

¹ Please see our paper entitled, "Unfair and Unequal Policies of the West towards the Muslim World", presented at the "International Seminar on Terrorism – A New Challenge to the Muslim World" organized by the Jang Group, Pakistan, 20-21 December 2001.

In reviewing the cause of large scale imperialism against many Muslim states by the West, an Islamic scholar once said:-

“The main target of western imperialism was the Islamic faith and culture everywhere including Europe, the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. Culture represents beliefs, values, attitudes and manners of a society and these precisely were the areas where the greatest erosions was caused by western imperialism. The destruction of Muslim cultural identity was the principal aim of western imperialism in the 18th and 19th century.”²

² Altaf Gauhar, “Western Cultural imperialism – An Old Problem, A New Challenge”, paper presented in *Seminar Dakwah Islamiyyah di Asia dan Pasifik* (Islamic Da'wah Seminar in Asia and the Pacific), Kuala Lumpur, 24-28 February 1977.

Needless to say, much of the negative attitudes displayed throughout the world today towards Islam stems from an inability or failure to understand the basic fundamentals of Islam as understood³ from its original sources, i.e. the Qur'an and the *Hadiths*⁴ of the Messenger himself. This last Abrahamic Religion and its followers has been portrayed as retrogressive, patriarchal, anti-modern, and the latest as extremist in nature which coherent with the old dictum created by anti-Islam groups that "Islam spreads through the sword!" In short, all the shortcomings of the past centuries are heaped on Islam and its adherents.

It is within these contexts that Islamic scholars like Prof. Al-Attas had proclaimed that,

³ See for example a classic writing of Prof. Muhammad Qutb, *Islam - The Misunderstood Religion*: London, Islamic Council of Europe, 1976.

⁴ Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH as compiled and authenticated by Islamic scholars throughout the ages.

*".....the greatest challenge that has surreptitiously arisen in our age is the challenge of knowledge, indeed not as against ignorance; but as knowledge as conceived and disseminated throughout the world by Western civilization; knowledge whose nature has become problematic because it has lost its true purpose due to being unjustly conceived, and has thus brought chaos in man's life instead of, and rather than, peace and justice....."*⁵

⁵ Syed Muhammad al-Naqib al-Attas, "Preliminary Thoughts on the Nature of Knowledge and the Definitions and Aims of Education," a paper presented at the First World Conference on Muslim Education organized by King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, 31st March to 8 April, 1977.

The West and Islam

When Christian scholars flocked to Spain to learn about Islamic theories of government and sciences, Muslim universities did not close their doors on the Christian scholars. Western civilisation today owes a great debt to Islam which they have repaid in the form of bigotry, racism and oppression. If the West and Islam are to be reconciled, the return to basic tenets of mutual respect and scholarship need be engendered and encouraged. This is wishful thinking but must be positively aimed for.

The fear of Islam or “Islamophobia” as described by the Runnymede Trust article “The Nature of Islamophobia” refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam⁶. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair

⁶ The Nature of Islamophobia, www.runnymedetrust.org/meb/islamophobia/nature.html

discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs. It is unfortunate that this fear of Islam has degenerated into a disease which must be identified and named (as Islamophobia) so that all “Islamophobics” could then be contained and “proper medication” could be prescribed. Much as the word “Anti-Semitism” has been coined to describe the some people are anti-Jewish, the Islamic world too has been afflicted with this disease of fear and hate.

It is to be stressed that Islam is not an enemy of the West and the West must never look to Islam as its enemy. To do so would cause great harm to either party as the aftermath of September 11, 2001 had proved to the world. Out of the ruins we can only hope to rebuild with stronger foundations and avoid making the same

mistakes. As former President Bush remarked post-September 11 tragedy, "The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace." In the same speech, he also said that, "Women who cover their heads in this country must feel comfortable going outside their homes. Moms who wear cover must be not intimidated in America. That's not the America I know. That's not the America I value."⁷ It is encouraging indeed to read such words of appeasement coming from a world leader however peace cannot come from one direction only, it has to be reciprocated by the other party to the power play. This is where we call on not only the current US government to heed its former President's word but also other so-called Western powers in exhibiting more tolerance and to do more to protect Muslims in the US and the world over, against abuses

⁷ "Islam is Peace Says President," www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-11.html

perpetrated by racist bigots. Current world leaders have a big role to play and the powers that can be brought against such intolerance is tremendous. It is time that those powers be wielded intelligently.

An alternative view is that human beings make selective use of the past in order to understand and to justify aspects of the present, and that the past is continually being redefined, even reinvented. According to this view both Muslims and non-Muslims choose to “remember” the past (more accurately, choose stories from the past) to illustrate feelings, fears and animosities in the present. Either way, the task of combating Islamophobia involves a repudiation of the power which stories about the past in general, and about the Crusades in particular, do certainly have⁸.

⁸ *The Nature of Islamophobia*, supra.

Another aspect of unfair Western treatment towards Islam is the sweeping generalisation of certain things which are Muslim where such generalisations are not levelled against non-Muslims. For example, Irish terrorists bombers are not called "Christian Fundamentalists" as opposed to "Muslim Fundamentalists." Westerners chose to ignore the fact that the term "fundamentalism" is a term coined by Christians to describe themselves as serious adherents to the principal tenets of Christianity⁹. Human rights and democratic principles are nonexistent in Islamic countries as opposed to western

⁹ *The Nature of Islamophobia*, supra.

Fundamentalism in Christianity

The term 'fundamentalism' was coined as a proud self-definition by a movement within American Protestantism in the period 1865–1910. It became publicly well-known from 1919 onwards, with the foundation of the World Christian Fundamentalist Association. The movement stood for a re-affirmation of historic Christian theology, morality and interpretation of scripture – the so-called 'fundamentals' – and was in opposition to modernising and liberalising tendencies in American church life. Its essential distinguishing feature was an insistence on a literal interpretation of the Bible, as distinct from treating stories such as the Creation in the light of modern scientific knowledge, and therefore as symbolic. For decades after 1919 the only people who used the term 'fundamentalist' were Christians. Some used the term in proud self-definition, others as a term of disapproval.

Fundamentalists tended to be in sympathy with, and frequently indeed associated with, the political rights Christian fundamentalism, in both its theological aspects and in its interaction with right-wing politics, continues to be considerably stronger in the United States than in Europe.

countries. Islamic rulers are deemed to be ignorant with regard to rights of citizens.

Such accusers fail to note the contribution of Muslim authors to studies of statecraft as espoused by Al-Mawardi in his *magnum opus*, “*Al-Ahkam Al-Sultaniyyah*”. This misconception is again a challenge that we Muslims must face and triumph over.

Disparaging remarks about Muslims and Islam are made not only by ignorant non-Muslims but so called intellectuals as well. Samuel Huntington wrote, “The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism - it is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power”¹⁰.

¹⁰ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996.

There is no such thing as an Islamic terrorist state, as Islamic teachings would instantly reveal that terrorism is un-Islamic and contrary to Islam.

What the West has come to fear from Islam is that Muslims see the West as decadent morally, with broken families, violent crimes, drug abuse and a host of other social problems. They see the West as nations of Christians who have forgotten the sacred teachings of Jesus Christ. Muslims long for a peaceful life in which they may provide for the basic needs of their families, and enjoy the respect due to all mankind regardless of their race, religion, position, or wealth.

Following the events of September 11, 2001 it has been stated time and again in the media that the war against terrorism is not a war against

Islam. This trend of separating Islam from the acts of terrorists, according to John L. Esposito, is a succinct admission that Islam is not judged with the same standard applied to Christianity or Judaism¹¹. Esposito writes further that:-

“Anti-Americanism is a broad-based phenomenon that cuts across Arab and Muslim societies. It is driven not by a blind hatred of America or religious zealotry, but by frustration and anger with U.S. policy in the Muslim world. America’s espousal of self-determination, democratization, and human rights are often seen in the Muslim world as a hypocritical double standard when compared to political and economic issues such as the impact of sanctions on more than a half million Iraqi children and sanctions against Pakistan but a failure to press Israel and India

¹¹ John L. Esposito, Exposing Double Standards, www.alhewar.com/john_esposito_exposing_double_standards.htm.

on their nuclear developments. Similarly, the moral will so evident in Kosovo is seen as totally absent in our policy of permissive neglect in the Chechnyan and Kashmiri conflicts. Critics believe that the significant continued presence of U.S. military and arms in the Gulf risks a new-colonialist military influence leading to uncritical support for authoritarian regimes as well as pressures on Arab governments to comply with U.S. foreign policy objectives, especially with respect to Israel and Palestine. Such a litany sparks the anger of many mainstream Arabs and Muslims, both overseas and in America and Europe¹².”

In this context also, Tariq Modood wrote that:-
“The 'clash of civilizations' idea poses a real danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy

¹² Ibid.

in this moment when we are all trying to make sense of what is happening in the world, who is to blame and how can justice and peace be furthered. The one thing we are surely on sound intellectual, as well as practical, grounds to challenge is the idea of separateness. The idea of Islam as separate from a Judeo-Christian West is as false as it is influential. Islam, with its faith in the revelations of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, belongs to the same tradition as Christianity and Judaism. It is, in its monotheism, legalism and communitarianism, not to mention specific rules of life, such as dietary prohibitions, particularly close to Judaism. In the Crusades of Christendom and at other times, Jews were slaughtered by Christians and their secular descendants and protected by Muslims. The Jews remember Muslim Spain as a 'Golden Age'. Islam,

indeed, then was a civilization, a 'superpower' and a genuine geopolitical rival to the West. Yet even in that period Islam and Christendom were not discrete nor mere competitors. They borrowed and learned from each other, whether it was in relation to scholarship, philosophy and scientific enquiry, or medicine, architecture and technology. Indeed, the classical learning from Athens and Rome, which was lost to Christendom, was preserved by the Arabs and came to Western Europe - like the institution of the university - from Muslims. That Europe came to define its civilization as a renaissance of Greece and Rome and excised the Arab contribution to its foundations and well being is an example of racist myth-making that has much relevance to today."

Wasatiyyah as the Peace Solution

We view the next millennium as a **challenge for Islam to propose its doctrine as a solution for social justice, true practice of modern democracy, advancement for peace, sustainable development and a “new world order”**. Since Asia, particularly East Asia is religio-centric in nature and that the religious influences are still intact, Islam could be seen as a very strong cohesive power within the region. Why not? Let us not forget the fact that when the Romans conquered Palestine, the Jews were expelled, reducing them to Jewish Diaspora; nevertheless when ‘Umar al-Khattab, the second Muslim Caliph conquered Palestine, the Christians and Jews were protected!

Freedom, justice, peace and equality have always been the virtues of every state. Through

the process of democracy, leaders of nations of the world tried to pursue various strategies and overcome thousands of hurdles in the hope of attaining political stability, economic prosperity and harmonious social stature. Since Aristotle, the term state and politics have been redefined by many social scientists to find the most appropriate and conducive means of life, but alas – the world's politics, was and has always been unstable. People of the world seems to forget their own roots – from where life begins and why are mankind created in this worldly life? To a Muslim, the answer has been clearly written in the Holy Qur'an more than 1400 years ago – the only Way to understand oneself, one World and One God!

The Islamic moderate position of *wasatiyyah* is a middle position between religious conservatism and extremism.

"The Qur'anic concept of al-Wasatiyyah or in the context of the Qur'an mentioned as Ummatan wasatan (a middle nation) tells the Muslims to be worthy of being "heir to ancient and universal truths, and to principles of social and human stability (often betrayed but never forgotten) of which our chaotic world has a desperate need; a nation which witnesses to a hope that transcends the dead ends against which the contemporary world is battering itself to death."¹³

Islam's notion of *Ummatan Wasatan* (Middle Nation) within the context of *Khayra Ummah* (the Best Nation) emphasizes on moderation, offering firm foundations in promoting inter-human cooperation. The betterment and development of the Muslim world in the age of globalisation and religious pluralism lies in adopting and practicing

¹³ See for example, Charles Le Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 26.

the Qur'anic concept and Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) practice of *al-wasatiyyah* as a model of life as explained and elaborated beautifully by one of the most prominent Islamic Scholar of today, Asy-Syaikh Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi.¹⁴

History has shown that Islam built a continuous high civilisation across the vast regions, cultures and peoples of the world which endured for a long period of time. Its strength lay in the message from God revealed to the last prophet PBUH and the practice of *wasatiyyah* - moderation by him and the subsequent generations. This noble code of conduct spread what can be defined as the pinnacle of Islamic civilisation to as far as Spain, colliding with what was then a morally decadent Christian civilisation. The Western civilisation would later learn of the works of Avicenna (*Ibn Sina*),

¹⁴ ` Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Fiqh AlWasatiyyah Al Islamiyah Wa Attajdid (Ma'alim Wa Manarat)* Dar Al Shurouq-2010-Cairo

Averroes (*Ibn Rushd*) and Rumi (*Jalaludin Muhammad Rumi*) amongst others. The aforementioned, coupled with history annals on the mutual respect between Richard the Lion Heart and Saladin, even in the fierce wars of the Crusades, goes to show that Islam and the West were not always at odds and that a symbiosis could be met. Thus, as mentioned previously, for the West and Islam to be reconciled, basic human values and mutual respect of one another need to be upheld; even if it may appear utopian to some.

Islamic civilisation started to flounder with the abandoning of the principle of *wasatiyyah* in all dimensions of life from religious practice to education, etc. It is time to revive *wasatiyyah* again. ***Wasatiyyah* does not mean compromise; it means confidence and right balancing to bring justice to its place.** The

challenges of development before the Muslims today cannot be answered only politically, they need an all rounded approach in all spheres of humanity.

When we propose Islam to be the cohesive power among nations of the world, we do not mean to ignore other religions and great traditions of the East as well as the West. Even if Islam rule, non-Muslims will always be protected under the Syari'ah. History has proven the case where Muslims have shown utmost tolerance and diplomacy. Let us not forget that when Prophet Muhammad PBUH signed the Hdaybiyyah Treaty with the non-Muslims, the Prophet PBUH did compromise up to the extent of agreeing not to write his name as the "Muhammad Rasulu'Llah but Muhammad bin

Abdullah”¹⁵ as against the strong protests coming from the sahabah (companions of the Prophet).¹⁶ To the Prophet PBUH, the object of getting the Treaty agreed and signed by the non-Muslims was far more important than discussing details that could have ended up with disagreement and to fall back to square one. We learnt from here how Islam interacts with non-Muslims with great concern, as long as the non-Muslims obey the Syari’ah fully and support the Dawlah (State) and the Muslim leader as the Imam.

There is no doubt that Islam has been the most misunderstood religion of the world,¹⁷ partly due to the behaviours (*akhlaq*) of the Muslims themselves for not being able to be exemplary to the non-Muslims. Likewise, Muslim nations are

¹⁵ “There is a great difference in it whereby *Muhammad Rasulu’Llah* confirms himself as the Prophet of Allah. This has been rejected by the non-Muslims up to the extent that they will not sign the Treaty if it is written as such. The Prophet condoned to the non-Muslims request instead.

¹⁶ Abu Bakar Siraj ad-Din, *Muhammad – His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983.

¹⁷ Muhammad Qutb, *Islam - the Misunderstood Religion*, Kuwait, 1969.

often at war with one another, but at the same time could be more than brotherly with other non-Muslim states. This situation has brought the Islamic World to congregate and rethink about their future and destiny. The Middle East problem resulted in Israel's existence since 1948 and the Palestinians were left without a state - Masjidil Aqsa was robbed from the Muslim World! We sincerely think that its time for Muslims to prove to the world, as they did during the Dark Ages of Europe, that Muslim would be able to rule with justice and maintain peace to the world order.

The non-Muslims must not be afraid of the Muslims or the Syari'ah. What the Muslim world has lost today is the confidence of the non-Muslims in Islam due to the failure of Muslims to profess their faith as in accordance to the Holy Qur'an. That's why we propose the slogan "going back to the Qur'an" is most appropriate for the Muslims of today. Great Muslim civilisation were

once Gurus of the West in terms of sciences, philosophy, architecture and many other fields of knowledge – “knowledge triumphant”, borrowing the terms of Franz Rosenthal.¹⁸

¹⁸ Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970.

Conclusion

In these difficult times, we as members of the Islamic ummah should close ranks under the banner of Islam as taught by the Prophet PBUH and as exemplified by the lives of the *sahabah*. We should spread the message that Islam is a religion of peace and to be extremely Muslim is a state of being where a person is totally committed to all the commandments and prohibitions of Allah. To be extremely Muslim or to be fundamentally a Muslim is a far cry from to be an extremist or fundamentalist. An extremist or a fundamentalist is a person who only chooses certain aspects of Islam and discards the rest of Islam as a total way of life. In turn he then distorts such aspects of Islam that he has selected by using hate to propagate his agenda and declaring his actions to be Islamic.

Islam is a universal religion and God given. It will continue to attract millions to its fold regardless of the stench of extremism committed in the name of Islam. The light of Islam will shine through in the end. What the Islamic world should strive for is a better understanding of Islam by Muslims and thereafter to propagate the faith to others as a totally comprehensive religion and contemporary in nature. Only then will humanity be freed from the shackles of ignorance, greed and rapacity.