
Islamic Civilization: Sources of Moderation and Manifestations of Extremism

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Introduction

The intellectual and economic stagnation that Muslim countries seem to suffer currently has resulted in self-doubt and suspicious scrutiny, by Muslims, of their cultural heritage and the foundations of their civilization. However, a strong sense of affinity to their culture has led many to believe that theirs is the morally stronger culture even though it is the weakest in material terms. The real conundrum here is this: why has the Muslim Civilization, with its strong emphasis on moderation and enlightenment and a glowing record in applying these principles, now become the source of some appalling manifestations of intellectual extremism and behavioral perversion. This paper will attempt to answer this question while exploring three main issues:

- I. Sources of Moderation in Islamic Civilization
 - 1- Religious moderation
 - 2- Intellectual temperance
 - 3- Peaceful coexistence
 - 4- Religious tolerance

II. Manifestations of Extremism in Islamic Civilization

- 1- The controversy of faith and history
- 2- The rise of takfiri ideology and its effects
- 3- Imperial jurisprudence and injustice

III. Islamic Renaissance

1. Sources of Moderation in Islamic Civilization

1.1 Religious moderation

Religious moderation in Islam emerged as a result of the significant theological conceptual shift that ensued the foundation of the new faith. Long rooted beliefs of polytheism and paganism were replaced by monotheism and the worship of Allah, the one true god, and material barriers to the conception of the sacred and divine were pulled down. The new faith created a new man, liberated from old superstitions and distorted ideas about being, and the nature of the world he lived in. This was a new man who enjoyed moderate thought, pure faith and a calm enlightened soul (Khalil & Arabea, 2004).

The Holy Quran defines this shift and its nature as:

Allâh is the Walî (Protector or Guardian) of those who believe. He brings them out from darkness into light. But as for those who disbelieve, their Auliya (supporters and helpers) are Tâghût [false deities and false

leaders, etc.], they bring them out from light into darkness. Those are the dwellers of the Fire, and they will abide therein forever.¹

It also explains how Islam liberates the human race and how Allah ‘*he releases them from their heavy burdens (of Allāh's Covenant), and from the fetters (bindings) that were upon them*’.² It frees them from shackles of ignorance and fear as it is ‘the righteous path and all else is false and perverse’ (Khalil & Arabea, *ibid*).

It is important to note that this shift to moderate thought and belief was not directed only at Arabs, albeit springing from amongst them and from their lands. The doctrines of Islam have set the straight path to the belief in Allah, the one true god, supported by reason and proof – without pressure, coercion or temptation– because they are consistent with the laws of nature and our instincts.

This explains why the Reformation that took place in Europe from the 7th century until the modern renaissance was influenced by this moderating effect of Islam and tried to present a new doctrine free of the hegemony of the clergy, who saw themselves as intermediaries between God and his creatures, over the common man. It aimed to abolish all their myths and delusions. Martin Luther, who initiated the movement, revolted against the Church and called for the separation of religion and

¹ Al-Baqarah/257

² Al-A'raf/157

state, and for freedom from the authority of the Church (see Bela'am, 2006).

1.2 Intellectual temperance

The Holy Quran was revealed to a nation that had relatively limited knowledge. Therefore, it was necessary to broaden their horizons and reignite their thirst for knowledge. It is no coincidence then that the Quran starts with the simple directive: 'read'. It is no coincidence either that this order to read is used twice in three different verses. Similarly, words such as 'taught' are used three times. That it (what – the word for taught or iqra???) refers specifically to the 'pen' as the tool man uses for learning' is of great significance. It goes on to direct Muslims to read, contemplate, use their reason, inspect, rationalize and reflect (Khalil & Alrabea, *ibid*). These were the signals that man should no longer be a passive spectator of the universe around him. It was time to for curiosity and wonder, and for the human race to seek perfection armed with the truths revealed to him by this new faith (Khalil & Alrabea, *ibid*). From this novel perspective of the universe came intellectual temperance. A Muslim can now seek the truth through knowledge acquired by 'reading' and critical thinking as dictated by the Quran and not through dubious means, fantasies and superstitions.

1.3. Peaceful Coexistence

Islam transformed the Arab culture from what Oswald Spengler calls a state of 'false formation' to a whole mature entity. That was because the Arabs existed on the fringes of old mighty civilizations, not as a nation with a unified culture, but as groups that were only loyal to their tribes and their leaders. However, they distinguished themselves from the other groups – ethnically from the Persians, Romans, Byzantines and Ethiopians – and ideologically from the Jews, Christians, Zarathustrians and agnostics. It is quite possible that the Arabs were familiar with these cultures and so were in awe of their civilizations and respectful of their religions (see Alawdat, 2010). However, Islam preached a different worldview, with new values and norms. It dictated that all men were equal regardless of their ethnicity. The Holy Quran taught that *'... We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allâh is that (believer) who has At-Taqla [i.e. one of the Muttaqla (pious – see V.2:2). Verily, Allâh is All-Knowing, All-Aware.'*³

Tribalism was revived when the reign of Islam spread across the globe, and the Arabs suddenly found themselves ruling over nations previously unfamiliar to them like the Berbers, Copts, East Africans, Sicilians and Turks, and perceived themselves as the true founders and guardians of the glorious religion. However, their code of conduct ultimately

³ Al-Hujurat/13

remained unaltered and they still adhered to the teachings of Islam by which the 'other' did not fear for himself or his possessions and practiced his religion freely. Granted, deviations occurred, but these were the exception. The Muslim World had by then evolved into a complex community – a true melting pot of cultures and ethnicities. In fact, it developed from a tolerant society to one where coexistence was the norm.

Evidence of this coexistence is abundant in the history of Islam. In fact, coexistence became part of its cultural references. The famous historian, William J Durant (1935), describes how that 'during the Umayyad era, Christians, Zoroastrians, Jews and Sabeans living in Muslim lands enjoyed a degree of tolerance which they did not in contemporary Christian countries. They were free to practice their religions, kept their churches and temples, and were not obliged to do more than wear clothes of a certain distinct colour and pay a fixed levy that varied according to each person's income, ranging from 1 to 4 to dinars (about US \$ 4.75 to US \$ 19). This levy was only imposed on able non-Muslims while priests, women, children, the aged, disabled and destitute were exempt. In return, members of these non-Muslim communities were not enlisted into the military service, were not required to pay the annual zakat of 2.5% of the income, and received the full protection of the government. Although their witness testimonies were not accepted by Muslim courts, they enjoyed a degree of autonomy where they

presented their cases to their own leaders and judges, and submitted to their own laws.’

Another author, the Andalusian explorer Ibn Jubair, expresses his astonishment at the simple coexistence between the Muslims and Christians during the time of the Crusades saying that ‘it is truly wondrous that while the war is raging and clear differences of loyalty and affiliation between Muslims and Christians have become apparent that the Muslim caravans travelling from Egypt and Damascus to lands under Crusader control like Acre and Christian ones travelling into Muslim lands remain numerous and continue their business unmolested. It’s true that merchants pay tax on either side for their own protection, but they are safe and carry out their business unhindered so while the soldiers are busy with their own wars, people lead safe lives (Ibn-Jubair, 1980).’

1.4. Religious Tolerance

Adherents to numerous different religions and Muslim sects coexisted harmoniously in the land of Islam. Reports of persecution for divergent beliefs and leanings have been rare and the reasons for this persecution were more often political than religious. This was partially because even though Muslims themselves still believed in the one religious text, there were various interpretations of it. These interpretations often contradicted each other, even those produced by members of the same sect or theological school. The result was a vibrant multi-polar intellectual environment that had no match anywhere else in the world.

People could observe the doctrines of any of a multitude of prominent theologians such as Abu Hanifa, Malik, Shafi'i, Ahmad, Jafar Sadiq, Tabari, Abu Sufian Althawri, Laith bin Saad, Ata bin Abi Rabah, and Hassan bin Basrah. They could also adhere to any of the many sects like Mu'tazil, Ibadi, Matarid, Al-Qa'abiya, Jafariyah, Shaziliya and Qadiriya. Old religious texts such as Al-ash'Ari's 'Sayings of Muslims,' Al-Baghdadi's 'Differentiating the Creeds,' or Shaherstani's 'Faiths and Beliefs,' display examples of the fantastic array of theological thoughts of countless different sects and one cannot but concede that no one school or group can truly typify Islamic heritage (see Alrasheed, 2016). These Muslims also lived in peace with members of many other religions such as the Christians, Jews, Zarathustrians and Sabaeans.

Naturally, the ideas of all these schools of theology could be considered as just that; ideas and views that could be right or wrong. Their creators themselves never claimed them to be the absolute truth and so the extremism associated with some of these schools in the history of Islam can simply be attributed only to the adherents (see Obaid, 2015). The prominent theologian Abu Hanifa, for example, clarifies that what the scholars teach is 'just ideas – a culmination of their efforts. However, others may be able to produce better and more accurate ideas.' On another occasion, a student asked him whether his fatwas were the absolute truth, and so he responded: 'Allah only knows. They could be

the absolute untruth.’ Ibn Alqayem reports that Abu Hanifa and Abu Yousif asserted that ‘it was not reasonable for someone to quote us, if they had no knowledge of the sources we used to reach our ideas.’ Whenever Imam Malik, the 6th century theologian, devised a new doctrine he would ask his followers to ‘critically review it as these are matters of religion and nobody, but Allah, is infallible.’

It is then reasonable to say that coexistence as a phenomenon is a purely Muslim innovation – a homegrown social product that was never imported from elsewhere.

2. Manifestations of Extremism in Islamic Civilization

Unfortunately, this deviant behavior has become so commonplace in recent years to the extent that it is threatening to topple the Muslim civilization and that the term extremism has become almost synonymous with Islam. This is in spite of the fact that people coexisted freely in the land of Islam for centuries. Historical evidence proves that extremism is alien to the religion and civilization of Islam and that the phenomenon is nothing but the result of the twisted actions and thoughts of particular individuals and/or groups.

Extremism is the departure from the intellectual and behavioral norms and values held by society. Extremists may resort to violence, collectively or as individuals, to defend and forcibly impose the alternative set of values they have adopted on others (Alkhawajah). Extremism can also be

defined as the shift from mere ideals to observable behavior or political action that is often violent in nature and that aims to implement these ideals. Advocates of these edicts can also resort to psychological, material or intellectual terrorism in order to coerce any who may obstruct the implementation of their extremist ideas (Baiumi, 1992). In the following part, we will discuss the manifestations of extremism in the Muslim world.

2.1. The controversy of faith and history

A historical perspective combines the idea that protagonists of all historical events are ultimately human and that their adherence to their religious beliefs is not a constant state. Therefore, we analyze and explore the natural causes of some of the more difficult events in the history of Islam, guided by religious texts that can reveal the nature, impact and motives behind these events.

Undoubtedly a believer strives to follow the decrees of his religion, but to err is human. Therefore, we cannot condemn the teachings of the religion itself for the transgressions of some of its followers, nor can we paint them all with the same brush. However, the fundamentalist extremist ideology that characterized a certain period of our history meant that religion was the weapon often used against adversaries and so an opponent who simply held different views, including political ones, was decried as a heretic, infidel or an apostate. The price that all sides

have paid for these extremist attitudes has been very dear (see Shalqam, 2011).

2.2. The rise of takfiri ideology and its effects

We need to admit that there are some historical, psychological and intellectual bases for violence in our culture that have had a tremendous effect on some schools of thought since the emergence of Khawarij in the first century A.H. However, while it can be argued that the Holy Quran promoted 'strength,' it condemned 'violence' and the injustice and terrorism that ensue. There is a fine line that separates violence and power: a paradigm that shifts according to the motives and visions of the individual or group. In our modern days, this khawariji, takfiri thought has reemerged because of two important factors:

- 1- The availability of rapid means of transportation and tools that provide instant communication.
- 2- The stress of modern society on individualism that has led to the corrosion of family and government authority in a state akin to widespread anarchy.

The roots of this philosophy of religious violence lie deep in khawariji thought and seem to have sprouted even during Prophet Mohamed's (PBUH) life. Albukhari quotes Abusalamah Ibn Abdurrahman citing Aba Saeed Alkhudri who recounted an incident when he and others were present while the Prophet (PBUH) was distributing shares among the

men. At this moment, a man called (Dhul Khawaisarah) from the Bani Tamim tribe walks in and demands that the Prophet be fair, for which Mohamed (PBUH) admonished him saying that he would have lost this and the afterlife if he was not just and fair. Angered by the man's insolence, Omar Ibn Alkhatib asked the Prophet's permission to execute him. But Mohamed (PBUH) would not, telling those present that the man and his companions were nothing more than charlatans with whom his followers would find it hard to deign to share their religious rituals. They are people who read the Quran but comprehend nothing, and embrace the religion but it leaves no trace on them. They are the followers of a man with a dark heart and soul, but who nurtures their thoughts and breeds more of their ilk.

Trully enough, those were the same kind of people who revolted against Khalifa Othman for mere polticial, and not religious, reasons and dared to assassinate him while he was praying in the sanctuary of the mosque. It is also reported that one of them attended a sermon by the fourth Khalifa, Ali Ibn Abu Taleb and when he was asked what he thought of it as he came out of the mosque, he replied 'that little infidel has a lot of knowledge.' Their excesses ultimately forced Ali to fight them, especially when all attempts to reason with them failed. First, he sent his envoy Abdullah Ibn Abbas to them and he managed to convince about three thousand of them to return to the fold in one day. However, they soon started harassing and murdering people for their loyalty to Ali or Muawiyah. Therefore, he concluded that fighting them was inevitable

and he managed to defeat them at Alnahrwan where many of them were killed. However, their ideas seem to reappear from time to time, especially during political or social upheavals.

It is also important to stress that their extremist thought is also characterized by a kind of religious obsession. For example, and as recounted by Ibn Aljuzi in his book 'Satan's Confounds,' when it was time to execute Abdurrahman Bin Muljam Almuradi, the assassin of Ali Ibn Abu Taleb, Ibn Ja'far cut off his hands and legs but he did not flinch. Instead, he read the Quran during his ordeal. It was only when they proceeded to cut his tongue out that he responded, explaining that he would not want to be alive when unable to recite the Quran (Aljuzi, 2001).

Takfiri ideology is the consequence of various factors such as:

- 1- Serious ignorance of the edicts of the revelation, especially in relation to the issue of kufr, or infidelity, and the necessary conditions that must be satisfied before labeling someone as an infidel; also, ignorance of the different types of kufr, like minor, major, absolute and specific infidelity.
- 2- Being swayed by personal prejudices that lead them to label their opponents as infidels taking no heed of the tenets of Islam and its teachings.

- 3- Following heretic schools of thought and imitating minor scholars in labeling certain nations, societies or individuals as infidels.
- 4- Their complete lack of regard to the edicts of Islam concerning the issue of kufr and how infidelity is only proven in the presence of strong infallible evidence.
- 5- Relying on unsound and unsupported interpretations of the Quran and hadith.
- 6- The fact that many scholars have not reacted strongly enough to these infidels and still regard them as Muslims.
- 7- Their striving for political power and the consequent use of 'religious doctrines for political gain that they have become almost indistinguishable from the political thoughts of the different competing factions. They even vary according to the different contexts and are used to justify the practices of a certain party or other' (Aljendi, 2015).
- 8- Their lack of in-depth knowledge of Islamic theology and the Arabic language. This led them to embrace certain edicts, and not others, and gain a distorted and shallow understanding of religious doctrines. This, of course, made them unqualified to address these serious issues of faith and, in spite of their

unwavering belief, led them to commit the same errors as the Khawarij (www.dd-sunnah.net).

- 9- The disproportionate response to extremist thought. For example, the Almarja'ayah movement came as a reaction to the Khawarij, and so did fatalism that flourished due to the errors of the deterministic school. This has been the nature of many Muslim sects and the expected reaction to the excesses of one group or another (Alsaqar).

2.3. Imperial jurisprudence breeds injustice

It might be fair to say that during the Middle Ages, the Muslim Empire enjoyed significantly more religious tolerance and intellectual freedom than other states. However, the idea that all citizens are equal was not, and is still not, deeply instilled in its political philosophy and practices. Like other civilizations, the state in the Muslim world subjugated and controlled the public and the few ruled over the many. Aljiwini (see Aldeeb's edition, 1981), a contemporary theologian, even went as far as to declare that 'what we are certain of is that even the most enlightened and educated women, slaves, commoners, and non-Muslims have no right to choose the ruler and leader of the nation.' These views are very similar to the principles of Greek democracy where citizens were protected by the state but denied any political rights. Yet, they are contrary to the broad principles of political equality, regardless of gender, ethnicity or religious belief dictated in Muslim holy texts (Alshanqiti).

Alshanqiti also explains that Islamic jurisprudence was moulded according to the principles and perspectives of an empire rather than a nation. In addition, like all other empires, people were viewed as subjects or allies to a conquering power rather than free equal citizens of the state as in modern democracies. Malik Bin-nabi (2002) suggests that the main shortfall of the Islamic Civilization was its political system as this was not based on the teachings of the Quran but rather on the whims and wishes of whoever was in power.

In addition, this system lacked a mechanism to establish political accountability. As a result, it was difficult to achieve political reform while corruption and injustice went almost unchecked. Another effect of this lack of accountability was that resources were directed either to satisfy the extravagant needs of royalty or finance expansionist military campaigns, especially under Ottoman rule. On the other hand, such vital nation-building services, such as education, public health, research and the infrastructure were given very low priority in the schemes of the state (see Shabra, 2012).

A natural result of such a skewed political system is oppression, a fertile breeding ground for extremism. Now, fanatics could present proof that the state and the rulers are unjust and that it was their duty, as faithful Muslims, to oppose and bring down an ineffective and unfit government.

3. Islamic Renaissance

In order for this modern renaissance to happen, the Muslim World needs to undergo a substantial process of reform. It needs to be able to interact with such fundamental modern cultural issues as our perceptions of heritage and what to glean from it, and its relationship with present realities. This new mode of thought should provide answers and solutions to our current concerns and a vision for enlightenment. In order to achieve this, it is crucial to:

1- Initiate an intellectual reform in order to disperse the confusion between our entrenched values and material concepts and ideas necessary for functioning in this world. This reform requires an immediate self criticism to determine and remedy the pitfalls, and identify paths to intellectual revival (Alelwani, 2009).

2- Islamic theology, like all other parts of life, evolves. However, it can only adapt to changes in the modern world if our striving to better understand it is done in accordance with the basic edicts and teachings of Islam. In addition, our understanding of theology would benefit highly from an open intellectual environment where numerous ideas are expressed freely, and deep and careful study is encouraged (see Altiwiji, 2010).

3- Stress the importance of adhering to our religious and moral values and our Muslim worldview. Our belief in the Day of Judgment

would spur members of our community to fulfill their ethical, social, economic and political obligations in this world. That is because, as long as it is not done in an excessive or coercive manner, raising the level of moral awareness of a community is a prerequisite for cultural revival (Shabra, *ibid*).

4- Peacefully seek political reform even when nonviolence may not seem to yield immediate change. The Holy Quran encourages us to use dialogue, and not aggression, to resolve conflict;

*'Invite (mankind, O Muhammad SAW) to the Way of your Lord (i.e. Islam) with wisdom (i.e. with the Divine Inspiration and the Qur'an) and fair preaching, and argue with them in a way that is better. Truly, your Lord knows best who has gone astray from His Path, and He is the Best Aware of those who are guided.'*⁴

Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) also stressed the value of peaceful resistance when he stated that *'He who is deprived of kindness is deprived of goodness.'*⁵

5- Promote tolerance, moderation and religious temperance. School curricula, especially in religious schools, should include a module on the similarities between Muslim sects as a core subject. In addition, steps

⁴ An-Nahl/125

⁵ Sahih Muslim 2592, Grade: Sahih

should be taken to moderate religious sermons and ensure that they are free of signs of prejudice and extremism. The media and educational institutes also have a significant role to play in promoting these values.

6- Encourage and modernize the learning and teaching of humanities as they have a direct and significant effect on our value systems and worldview. Islam has fallen behind not only technologically but also in such fields as education, sociology, psychology and other human sciences (Ewais, 1994).

7- Review our methods of cross cultural communication. It is futile to focus on historical periods of struggle and strife, or to attempt to prove claims of cultural superiority in these dialogues. The focus should be on periods of peace and cooperation. We should also heed the edicts of the Quran as it informs us that

'O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqua [i.e. one of the Muttaqûn (pious). Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware. ٦

8- Revisit our cultural heritage and free old texts from dogma and rigid views. However, this should not be taken to mean that our heritage

⁶ Al-Hujrat/13

should be neglected or viewed as a hindrance to progress, as some orientalist would claim (see Alhanini, 2010). In fact, that would have the opposite effect, as it would deprive our youths of their roots and their national identity. What we propose here is to present the positives in our heritage and to reintroduce the nation to our scholarly writings in order to stimulate a strong cultural revival and reform.

9- Re-evaluate our stance on such crucial issues as systems of governance, politics, social justice, democracy, women's issues, civil rights, personal liberty etc.

10- Acknowledge all forms of religious devotion in order to create a tolerant and open cultural environment. In such a context, dialogue and co-existence would flourish and hinder the spread of extremist ideas that feed on the common man's sense of injustice and oppression (several authors, 2011). This new religious perspective and cultural environment, in which the norms of scholarly dialogue are observed, would lay the path to the emergence of a modern society that adheres to the principles of personal freedoms and peaceful coexistence.

11- Rewrite Islamic history from the perspective of one nation, highlighting its joined progress in all parts of the land of Islam. It is crucial that isolationism and the false ideas of limited nationalism signify weakness and go against the mission and destiny of the nation of Islam.

The teaching of the history of Islam should not be limited to reciting names and dates but these facts should be linked to the development and progress of Islamic thought, cultural achievements and contribution to world civilization (Es-haq Farhan, 2007)

12- Consider the idea of a total overhaul of religious sermonizing. It is my belief that the old sermons cannot be renewed or rewritten but should be completely forgotten. The new sermons should be written in a modern scientific style using contemporary language and new content that is enriched by the use of recent advances in the humanities and other sciences. This can be achieved through the following three steps; systematic doubt, establishing the distinction between what is holy and what is human in Islam, and discarding ancient superstitions that have no proof in Islam (Alhamamsi, 2017).