

Moderation in Islam

Islam
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By S.G. Jilaneer

Friday feature

MODERATION is currently the most fashionable buzzword, hyped to the high heavens, especially because it was "floated" in the same way as "roadmap," about a decade ago. But this is the age of semantics, where words are given a sense different from original connotation.

The word 'moderation' offers a glaring example of semantics. For example: who did not know that the term means "avoidance of extremes?" Who did not know the blessings of a steady, middle course and the curse of extreme attitudes in every sphere of human life? So why should it have to be trumpeted about as if it is a new-found gem of wisdom?

This word at present is being mainly applied and addressed to Muslims. It is not applied to other communities such as Christians, Jews and Hindus. And, besides, those who preach moderation the loudest are themselves often its most flagrant violators. For instance, not long ago there was a furore in the US media about the insulting remarks against Islam that US deputy under-secretary, Lt. Gen. William Boykin made before church gatherings. Yet, he was not even disciplined.

The desecration of mosques in India and Israel and the torching of churches are ignored.

Nevertheless, it is a tragic irony for Muslims to have to be lectured on "moderation," by non-Muslims. (A Muslim's identity, Islam, which means submission (to Allah) and peace, itself embodies the basic elements of "moderation," — balance, due proportion, tolerance, justice and equity — because abiding each and tranquillity is unthinkable in a situation of extremes. In fact, moderation or balance is the core value, the very soul of Islam.)

(Whoever claims to be a Muslim is, therefore, expected to be aware of what moderation means and how excess should be avoided in practical life. If they do not, their faith would be incomplete and amount, at best, to lip service.) They would be like the desert mentioned in the Holy Quran 49:14 "The desert Arabs say, 'We believe', (O Prophet) Say, 'Ye have no faith but ye only say 'We believe'...' On the other hand, if any Muslim knowingly abandoned moderation, then he strayed from the Straight Path (*siratal mustaqeem*).

Being in complete accord with nature, Islam approaches the issue of moderation holistically to encompass all aspects of human conduct, both in personal matters and in social life. Therefore, Islam treats extremism not only in its negative (violent or provocative) aspect, as the West tends to do, but in its positive (virtuous) aspect, as well.

Extremes of both kinds, too much as well as too little (*ifraat* and *tafreet*), have to be avoided. To make the point, the Holy Quran mentions balance, Justice and due proportion repeatedly in every sphere of creation, including even ele-

ments, planets and stars.

"Every single thing is before His sight in due proportion." (13:8). Planets orbit on their fixed routes; none collides with the other.

"It is not permitted for the sun to catch up with the moon." (36:40). The sun and the moon, both, traverse the belt of the zodiac and (their motions are different, yet they never catch up with each other. It is the same with everything else. Again, in 15:19, "And the earth We have spread 'out, set thereon mountains firm and immovable and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance."

Thus equilibrium is in the very nature

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of things; any disturbance in it would be a recipe for disaster. For example, overeating would cause indigestion and the slightest change of molecules could turn wholesome water into poison. There is no extreme either way in the Divine dispensation, but a just balance. 1

One of the fields of positive activity where mankind was likely to go to extremes was in the worship of God. Indeed, this appeared on the face of it to be the surest way to earn His pleasure and the eternal bliss of salvation. Many people professing other faiths, therefore, in their religious ardour, renounced the world.

They became hermits, ascetics, celibates. They went to dwell in caves performing rigorous penance to expiate their sins and purify their soul.

Yet, to renounce the world in order to serve and worship Allah is neither the practical nor the natural way of life. It would even conflict with His purpose of Creation if everyone gave up the world and took to a life of celibacy, asceticism and confined himself only to prayers.

Thus, when Allah says, "I created, jinn and men only that they worship/serve Me", the implication of worship and service is not endless prayers and fasting and turning His name on the heads of a rosary. And to bring the point home, He instructed His Messenger to, "stand (to prayer) by night but not all night; half of it, or a little more or less."

Returning to the question of moderation, let us take "positive" extremism first. This kind relates entirely to one's personal actions, which do not affect other people. Several items fall in this category; first of them being religion. Too much of religious zeal may end up in fanaticism and bigotry. So the Quran

says, "Commit no excess in your relation." (4:171).

The second is charity: The Book is replete with exhortations, inducements and commands to spend, spend and spend, yet it admonishes "The servants of Allah are those who, when they spend are not extravagant and not niggardly but hold a just (balance) between those (extremes)." (25:67). Elsewhere it say, "... And render to kindred their due rights as also to those in want and to the wayfarer. But squander not your wealth in the manner of a spendthrift. (17: 26-27).

In the context of food: "Eat of the good things We have provided for your sustenance but commit no excess therein...." (20:81). As regards, lifestyle: "O children of Adam! wear your beautiful apparel

and eat and drink but waste not by excess for Allah loveth not the wasters. Finally, even in happiness and sorrow there is admonition against extremes.

The negative side of extremism affects other people, which is why it has triggered the current outcry for moderation. This kind of extremism would include, from reviling other people's gods (faith) to retaliation and revenge. As to the first, the Command is "Reville not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah ..." (6-108).

As to retaliation, Islam recognizes the natural instinct of mankind to avenge an injury. Therefore, it has prescribed retaliation (law of equality) in the case of murder, such as "the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman," but authorizes the heir of the slain to grant remission.

It warns that, "after this whoever exceeds the limits shall be in grave penalty." (2:178) Elsewhere it is repeated thus, "And if anyone is slain wrongfully We have given his heir authority to demand (Qisas or forgive), but let him not exceed bounds in the matter. (17:33).

Islam also recognizes *lex talionis* (again the law of equality). "Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth and wounds equal for equal." (5:45). "The recompense for an inquiry is an injury equal thereto," it says. (42:40). But, any excess is strictly forbidden. "(Do not commit excess)" is the Divine admonition and the warning, "Allah does not love those who transgress."

On the other hand, forgiveness is encouraged. From 5:8 where it says, "... Stand out firmly for Allah in fair dealing and let not the hatred (if others to you make you swear to wrong and depart from justice" Fairness, justice, balance and restraint are extolled as excess is deplored and throughout the Book.

In the light of the above submissions therefore, those who suggest moderating Islam, only expose their ignorance of the Divine Message.

The fact is that Islam enjoins its followers to give lessons in moderation to other people. What the Muslims need today, therefore, is not lectures in the liberals' concept of moderation, but to delve into the treasure trove of guidance that Islam has already bequeathed to them.