

The Futile Quest for “Moderate Islam”

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Faced with radical clerics and militants justifying murder and mayhem on the basis of Islamic theology, many well-meaning Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers have sought to promote a more moderate version of the Islamic faith. On further scrutiny, however, this seemingly self-evident approach may be problematic, even futile, and is better demoted from its current status as a cornerstone in countering radicalism.

While at first sight appealing, the notion of moderate Islam constitutes an undue concession to the argument that individuals and societies who hold Islam as part of their faith and cultural heritage are to be defined primarily by their religious affiliation — a standard seldom applied to other religions. Certainly many Muslims would highlight the importance of religion in their world view. But the place of faith and its interaction with other elements of identity — culture, nation, language, ideology, lifestyle, etc. — is better viewed as a process of negotiation and circumstances, rather than in a rigid hierarchy assumed at face value. In spite of the claim to the oneness of Islam, whether globally or locally, the faith itself is understood and expressed differently, with a multitude of variations stemming from the diverse sources of religious experience.

The effort to transpose widespread acceptance of the unity of the faith into a normative religious system has always been an unaccomplished project. Its current promoters are advocates of radicalism in theology and politics, as well as many champions of moderate Islam. While the radical and moderate propositions differ on content, they both seek a coherent, unified, and authoritative version of faith. The two projects draw the lines differently, but they both engage in demarcating “true” Islam from its subversions. Across history and geography, the plural expressions of the lived faith of the Muslims — orthodox, unorthodox, heretic, and syncretistic — have resisted attempts at containment. Supporting the notion of a moderate Islam — defined and governed by clerics and thinkers designated as moderates — is tantamount to taking sides in favor of homogenizing Islam, albeit in favor of “moderation”, at the detriment of unbound pluralism. Here lies one fundamental error of the “moderate” advocacy.

Whether deliberately or inadvertently, advocating a moderate Islam privileges one scholasticism as a more authentic version of the faith, hoping that moderate scholastic propositions would triumph over their radical counterparts. An examination of the theological debate in the last century, however, dismisses such hope. Moreover, it reveals that the radical proposition is itself a direct product of the moderate formulation.

Pre-modern Islamic scholasticism was privileged by the state's reliance on its graduates for multiple administrative and legal functions. It was later further privileged by Western scholarship, which had to rely on a primarily oral legacy for a partial understanding of the faith and culture of diverse Muslim communities. Yet, this pre-modern scholasticism exhibited a high tolerance for inconsistencies in its systems of jurisprudence and theology. The impulses for a rigid coherence, most notably the one heralded by the fourteenth century cleric Ibn Taymiyyah and his successors, were rejected as subversive to the establishment and reductionist towards the tradition.

Modernity, in the nineteenth century, rescued Ibn Taymiyyah's project. Convinced of the fundamental compatibility between religion and civilization, modernist clerics engaged in an effort to liberate the essence of Islam from accumulated layers of superstition and irrationality. Towards this end, they adopted a range of novel analytical and exegetical tools. Two such tools would have dramatic implications on the subsequent evolution of Islamic theology.

The first tool was the historical contextualization of Islam's formative period. Over the centuries, the Prophet's biography had evolved into exuberant hagiographies. Modernist clerics sought to extract out of the diffuse tradition a coherent narrative that highlights the Prophet as a state builder. The Prophet was thus brought down from a religious consciousness that placed him at the intersection with the divine into human history. The Muslim modernist rationalization of early Islamic history accepted and amplified many of the approaches and assumptions of Western scholarship: that a reasonably accurate history of the Prophet could be recovered from the sources in spite of their late compilation, and that a chronological succession of events shaped the evolution of the faith. For modernist, and later progressive, clerics, this evolution was towards governance based on justice.

The second tool was the weighing of tradition on the basis of fundamental principles. Assessing the content of traditions for its compatibility with the tenets of the faith has always been a standard exegetical tool. In their pursuit of a modern Islam compatible with much of the values of the enlightenment, however, modernist and progressive clerics sidelined many of the safeguards that protected traditions from being discarded or stopped them from becoming authoritative.

Thus was born the progressive Islamic theology that was influential in much of the twentieth century. Based on the formative history of the religion and on traditions collected from across the corpus, Islam proved compatible with democracy, pluralism, human rights, and universal values. Progressive Islamic theology rejected regimentation of social and personal life, and limited the clerical authority's reach only to the religious.

Radical Islamic theology did not innovate. It merely applied the tools introduced by its progressive counterpart, but with different primordial assumptions. Rather than seeking harmony with the ideas of the Enlightenment, it aimed for the total dissociation of Muslims from non-believers. From its perspective, the historicization of the Prophetic biography was welcome, since its last chapters are martial. As to selective and biased reading of the traditions, the corpus lends itself, with even more ease, to creating a collection of rulings mandating harshness and intransigence, as opposed to the leniency and tolerance promoted by progressive Islamic theology.

For each account of acceptance of the non-Muslim or of equality for women highlighted by progressive Islamic theology, the radical faction would provide a host of counter-accounts, often better sourced from the corpus. While in conventional theologies the lenient traditions served to blunt and even nullify harsher accounts, the precedent set by progressive Islamic theology in disregarding the harsh accounts was duly applied by the radical readings to dismiss the opposite, with a resulting robust, unqualified radical theology.

Yet the expectation of proponents of “moderate Islam” is that some compendium of traditions will be pulled out from the scholastic corpus to refute and rebuke the radicals. It is a futile quest. The paradigm shift from the acceptance of inconsistencies to the exigence of a coherent system has done irreversible damage to Islamic scholasticism as a potential purveyor of tolerant values. Religious doctors and thinkers are welcome to seek new paradigm shifts to re-align Islamic theology with the values shared by many Muslims and non-Muslims — the extension of dignity, freedom, and equality to all. But Islamic scholasticism should not be equated with the full religious experience of Muslims, even while most clerics, moderate and radical, proclaim their custodianship of the faith. Personal piety, ritualism, spiritualism, mysticism, and syncretism are all equally true sources of communion with the divine for many Muslims. Nor should the false assumption that religion — whether accessed by the scholastic, the ecstatic, or any other means — sums up the concerns of people with Muslim faith, culture, or heritage.

Rather than engaging in the intra-scholastic battle between moderates and radicals, the battle of ideas could be better framed as one between the shared values that unite people of all belief systems and a radicalism that seeks to impose totalitarian regimentation.



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