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Is There a 'Moderate' Islam?

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Brief Analysis

Two prominent Muslim intellectuals discuss how to strengthen moderation within Islam and counter the radical ideology that has emerged in its name.

On December 11, Irshad Manji and Mohammed Dajani addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Manji is the founder and director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University and author of Allah, Liberty, and Love (2011). Dajani is the Institute's Weston Fellow and founder of the Wasatia movement of moderate Islam. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

IRSHAD MANJI

The difference between "reformist" Muslims and "moderates" is not semantic. The latter term is misleading because many "moderate" Muslims exhibit all the traits of orthodoxy, including dogma and a fear of challenging their communities' groupthink. The qualities associated with religious moderation are positive and desirable as a goal, but they are inadequate as a means to realize positive change in Islam. Although Islam has the potential to be wise and tolerant, it has been deeply corrupted, and rooting out this corruption requires something more potent -- even

radical -- than moderation. It requires reform. As Martin Luther King Jr. said about a racially segregated America, moderation in times of moral crisis is a cop-out.

The good news is that a new generation of Muslims is increasingly using the word "reformist" to describe their pluralist and humanist aspirations for Islam. Their vision for "reformist Islam" is not one that merely abstains from terrorism. It includes dignity for gays and lesbians, full equality for women, respect for religious minorities, and tolerance for different points of view. In all likelihood, a critical mass of this generation's Muslims will provide audible calls and visible evidence for each of these principles.

Society should seek out and support budding reformists, just as humanist Christians and secularists in eighteenth-century Germany rallied behind reformers of an insular, walled-off Judaism. Muslims must lead the movement for Islamic reform and prepare for the inevitable backlash from Muslim elders and self-appointed community leaders. Their success will also require mainstream backing.

Steeped in group identity, many Muslims fear they will be ostracized if they speak out in their communities. This dynamic inhibits them from naming imperialism within Islam, even though Muslim imperialists target and kill fellow Muslims in far greater numbers than foreign powers.

The fear of stigma is cultural more than religious. The Quran contains plenty of passages about the need to display moral courage by standing up to abuse of power inside one's own tribe. Islamic scripture also calls on Muslims to think rationally. There are three times more surahs advocating introspection and analysis than blind submission. In this sense, reformist Muslims are at least as authentic as the moderates and, quite frankly, more constructive.

More Muslims need to read -- not simply recite -- the Quran. Instead of reading, grappling with, and understanding it, many moderate Muslims simply repeat stale cultural shibboleths. Among the most damaging of these is the Arab custom of group honor, which intimidates moderate Muslims into silence lest they be accused of selling out their communities and dishonoring their families by sowing internal chaos and division. Group honor narrows the possibilities for individual liberty, freedom of thought, and personal responsibility. It victimizes women because they are assigned the burden of carrying familial shame. Men also face cultural pressures to conform to low expectations of behavior, which leads to their infantilization. In this way, both genders experience limited choices and lack of empowerment.

Arab cultural norms, with the assistance of petrodollars, have colonized the faith of Islam, undermining even traditionally pluralist and tolerant practices such as those of Indonesia. This reality is all the more disturbing given that 80 percent of Muslims worldwide are non-Arab. Yet instead of exposing the cultural imperialism that emanates from Saudi Arabia and its oil-rich neighbors, "moderate" Muslims tend to obsess about American, Israeli, and Indian colonialism. Out of defensiveness, they practice a dangerous form of distraction. This highlights the shortcomings of moderation -- in theory, it is an admirable end state, but in practice, it is incapable of reclaiming Islam's better angels.

Practically speaking, then, moderation may be the objective, but reform is the means to that end. Moderation as a destination is beautiful and Islamic, but only reform will generate the creative tension necessary to push Muslims out of their comfort zones and engage with the critical questions facing Islam.

In pursuing this goal, reformist Muslims can be assured of their religious integrity. Muslims are obliged to worship one God, not God's self-appointed ambassadors. Because nobody can legitimately claim a monopoly on truth and knowledge, the paradoxical conclusion is that Muslims have a spiritual duty to build societies in which we can disagree with each other in peace and with civility. In short, commitment to one God obliges us to defend human liberty.

MOHAMMED DAJANI

Islam needs to transition away from the past and move on to the future. The concept of “reform” implies a return to the past. Christianity, and Judaism are religions of moderation, reconciliation, and peace. Because these qualities are essential to the human pursuit of felicity and security, these religions are part of the solution to conflict.

Unfortunately, all of these faiths can be perverted and abused by extremists, who cherry-pick verses to support their own agendas. Would-be peacemakers need to remember that their religions share the same moral values, including the golden rule, the prohibition against evil, and encouragement to do good deeds. Moderation is a core human virtue that can cultivate social harmony and peaceful coexistence.

In this sense, moderation is fundamental to Islam, with a clear basis that can be found in many surahs and hadith. Justifications for religious freedom, gender equality, and abolition of the death penalty can all be found in Islam. Only rational analysis of religious texts and principles enables one to reach a moderate and righteous version of Islam. Moderate Muslims also need to learn that jihad is the spiritual struggle within themselves against evil and sin, not a struggle against nonbelievers.

While extremists can select surahs and hadith to support their narrow interpretations of Islam, proper religious study looks at the intention of the text and teachings. Strictly literal interpretations do not provide true meaning -- Islam should look at the Christian reformation, which distanced the religion from literal interpretations of the Bible. Islam's ultimate aim is the betterment of humanity, so it must be studied with a human heart, not a heart of stone.

Moderates are also impelled to stand up against extremism committed in the name of Islam. Extremism will not be eradicated by a war of hatred, but by moderates conquering fear and promoting reconciliation. Muslims, Christians, and Jews know little about each other's religion; thoughtful interfaith dialogue can combat ignorance and highlight the good in all sides. Government, civil society, and think tanks also have a role in combating extremism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism.

While Arabs have monopolized Islam and imposed their terminology and interpretation, extremism promoted by the likes of Ibn Taymiyah, Sayyed Qutb, and others is not cultural. For example, female genital mutilation, the veil, enmity toward Jews and Christians, the stoning of adulteresses, and the killing of apostates and homosexuals are not prescribed in the Quran, nor are they traditionally Islamic, yet they are being practiced by extremists today. Moderate Muslims do not advocate or practice these backward views.

This summary was prepared by Patrick Schmidt. ❖



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