

The Politics of ‘Moderate Islam’

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Why Bangladesh is termed a Moderate Muslim country or why the people of Bangladesh are described as Moderate Muslims. Is it because we do not oppose U.S. hegemony? During the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, at that time we had in our country a caretaker government in power. The then caretaker government invited all former Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh for consultation as to whether to support U.S. invasion in Afghanistan and provide logistic support and accede U.S. demand to use our land and airspace. They all advised the then caretaker government to support U.S. and provide all facilities in the war. This is the reason why West terms us as Moderate Muslims. For the same reason, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are Moderate Muslim countries although Saudi Arabia implements Shariah. They do not question the U.S. authority. But Iran is not a Moderate Muslim country though practicing democracy but rogue state because it questions U.S. illegitimate actions. The West looks at us from their foreign policy perception, from their geo-political and geo-strategic interests. If we follow them we are Moderate Muslims.

I am against qualifying Islam or Muslim with such phrases as moderate or progressive. I think it is not an appropriate approach. However, I admit that if such classification is used for practical reasons and clearer understanding, there is no harm in it. We could not avoid classifying Muslims as Shias and Sunnis or Hanafis or Malikis and the like.

Having said this, I shall take a positive look in the matter. In verse 2: 143 Al Quran describes Muslims as Ummatan Wasata- the balanced community and to my mind the moderates are the balanced.

According to John L. Esposito Moderate Muslims are those who seek to change their condition by gradual process, reject extremism and shun violence and terrorism. Graham E. Fuller defined Moderate Muslim as one who believes in democracy, tolerance, non-violent approach to politics and equal treatment to women at legal and social levels.

Now let us discuss some of the features of the balanced community, the Moderate Muslims. What it really means?

Firstly, it means that the door of Ijtihad is still open. It means we have to renounce Taqlid, blind imitation. Life is an ever changing phenomenon and we have to work to find out solution to our contemporary problems. We cannot sit down and remain idle saying that our predecessors have solved all problems and we have nothing to do. A Moderate Muslim is one who cherishes freedom of thought. This freedom is

interlinked with the practice of Ijtihad. In fact Ijtihad is a Fard Kifaya, a collective responsibility.

Of course the person exercising Ijtihad must have a fair knowledge of Arabic which enables him to understand the Quran and Sunnah correctly and particularly the Verses and Hadiths that contain rulings (ayat wa-ahadith al-ahkam).

He must have a through knowledge of the sciences of the Quran and Hadith, which enables him to understand and identify the evidence (adilla) contained in the texts and, what is more, to deduce and extract judgments from them.

He should have a through knowledge and deep understanding of the objectives (maqasid) of the Shariah, their classification, and the priorities they imply.

He should have knowledge of his historical, social, and political context that is to say, the situation of the people living around him (ahwal al-nas), the state of their affairs, traditions and customs, and so on.

These qualifications have never been beyond the reach of the Islamic scholars, past and present. The progress that had been made in the arena of authentic Hadiths, the easy availability of Books of Hadiths due to advance printing technology, easier access to reference works, and computer-aided classification made the work of the Islamic scholars easier and more effective. The web and the internet have further facilitated research work. Consequently, the Muslim community, through its scholars, should still fulfill this fundamental duty today, even though it will be necessary to find a way to apply it appropriately in our contemporary context because of the new complexity of many sciences, such as medicine, technology, economics, the social sciences and so on. Ijtihad remains the most important instrument the Islamic scholars have at their disposal to fulfill the historic and universal responsibility, through a constant dynamic of adaptation in response to the time and changed context.

Secondly, being Moderate Muslim we have to agree that the Ijma, consensus of the earlier generations is not binding on us. We may accept or reject them on case to case basis and formulate new options.

Thirdly, being Moderate Muslim we must proclaim it in clear terms that the Quran and Sunnah constitute the Shariah. Shariah and Fiqh are not the same. The major parts of the Fiqh are opinions of the earlier generations although it may include (or includes) Shariah. We have to differentiate between Divine Law and human interpretation. We must distinguish between the Shariah and the Fiqh.

Fourthly, being Moderate Muslim we must stop branding every new practice, other than in the area of Ibadah (worship), as Bidah (innovation) for that is creating bar in the advancement of Muslim society. Muslims can modernize without de-Islamizing. Being Moderate Muslim we have to distinguish between the essential Islamic

cultural elements and what is not basic, and accept local cultural elements that do not contradict with the fundamentals of Islamic faith and values.

Fifthly, being Moderate Muslim we have to adopt easy options in Muamalat (works and transactions) when Islam offers different options in solving a problem.

Sixthly, being Moderate Muslim we have to accept pluralistic and democratic system. This will in no way clash with our faith and identity. It means we have to shun the path of violence and accept election as the only lawful method for changing government. We must reject violence as a means of settling political disputes. We must avoid confrontational politics. The present practice of inviting foreigners to solve domestic political problems, as observed in Bangladesh in the recent past, must be discouraged. We have seen in the television screen that our journalists are asking the U.S. Ambassador when Bangladesh national parliamentary elections will be held. Some political parties even showed interest in holding intra political dialogue at the residence of the U.S. Ambassador. It is no good to invite outsiders to interfere in our domestic problem. It will not only result in death and destruction but will end in occupation. Iraq is the noble example.

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