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Socio-Ethical Implications of the Qur'anic Term *Wasatiyyah*

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of religious extremism among some Muslim groups has tarnished the image of Islam among non-Muslims throughout the globe. Due to the misunderstanding, misconceptions and misinterpretation, many of the Qur'anic terms have assumed negative connotations. Religious intolerance, extremism and terrorism like terms are being used to refer to Islam both in East and West. This has made it significant for the scholars of Islam to promote the real meaning and teachings of the Islam. Al-Wasatiyyah (moderation) is one of the terms found in the Holy Qur'an which has many connotations both at individual and social level. It appeals to the believer to follow mid-way both in religious and social matters. It is a strong anti-dote to religious extremism and excessiveness. Qur'an and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet clearly warn against all kinds of extremism to avoid social conflicts.

KEYWORDS: Religious Extremism, Al-Wasatiyyah, Qur'an, Sunnah, Social.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic ethics and social values differ from all other philosophical ethics in the sense that the former are derived from Divine Revelation (Qur'an) and the practices of the Holy Prophet (Hadith). Islamic ethics is therefore a set of beliefs and actions that is divine and transcends the limitations of time, space, tradition and culture. By tradition and culture we mean the norms and values of a particular society that can at no cost be implemented in another society as they include differences in the systems of laws across nations. Islamic ethical teachings are not confined to a particular group of people; rather it is a message for whole mankind. The goal of Islamic teachings relating to ethics is character formation. The noble mission of Prophet Muhammad was nothing else but to strengthen the moral character of people. Al-Bukhari records Prophet as having said:

"I have been sent for the purpose of strengthening good morals".

Since, Islamic ethics is divine; therefore submission to the Will of only God includes all aspects of human life. The main aim of strengthening good morals is to bring about peace and harmony in the society. Treating others with generosity, helpfulness and benevolence towards others, patience, sincerity, honesty, humility, justice, straightforwardness, keeping a promise, speaking the truth, avoiding backbiting and falsehood etc are some basic ethical values which a Muslim is supposed to inculcate. A follower of Islam is supposed to possess all these noble characters according to the Qur'an and Hadith. The Qur'an is replete with clear messages pertaining to ethics (*Akhlaq*), the standards of behavior that God expects mankind to adopt because He has sent him to this world as His vicegerent. Islamic ethics is a code of conduct that calls for humankind to undertake a continuous process of self-purification, in thought, feelings and emotions (*Tazkiya Nafs*); in social interactions through intentions and deeds that benefit other human beings as well as other creations of God; in using the resources that God has given him in a wise manner; and in bringing him closer to the ideal as described by the Prophet:

"The best amongst you are those who are the owners of the best morality."

Islam is the religion of peace. Peace cannot exist without goodwill and toleration. Tolerance is as basic to Islam as other religious and moral duties. Tolerance in Islamic teachings means to accept the fact that all humans on the surface of this earth are sons and daughters of single male and female (Adam and Eve), but they are distinct in appearance, speech and behavior. Being distinct in such features cannot be a reason to discriminate one human being from another.

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.

Everyone has right to live in peace and to be as they are. Islam teaches tolerance at all levels: individual, group as well as national and international levels. Therefore the structure of tolerance upholds human rights, cultural diversity and the rule of universal ethical law.

The attempt here is made to understand the aspects of the Qur'anic term *Wasatiyyah* that carries socio-ethical connotations which are necessary to build a peaceful society based on religious tolerance and mutual co-existence.

Wasatiyyah:

The concept of moderation is familiar to other faiths also. We find this concept in Buddhism as well. Buddha is believed to have advised his followers to follow middle way based on the principles to avoid extremes of sensual pleasures and self-mortification. A follower of this concept is supposed not to advocate the acceptance of decrees given by someone outside oneself. It is a self-imposed discipline, not a principle that everyone could be expected to follow at every level. We do not argue that this concept in any way lacks the guidance necessary for moral conduct, except in the sense that the concept seems limited or confined to certain aspects of life, as is clear from its underlying foundation, '*The Eight Fold Path*'. On the other hand Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics contains the concept of Golden Mean that literally implies moderation or mean. Aristotle's Golden Mean is of course one of the ancient written document on *middle path*.

Aristotle says, "The virtue of justice consists in moderation, as regulated by wisdom". The doctrine of mean developed as a result of Aristotle's discussion on *Arête* (excellence or virtue). *Arête* is a kind of moderation as it aims at moderate amount and this virtue is essential for achieving the ultimate goal, happiness (Gr: *eudemonia*), which must be desired for itself. The concept of mean in Aristotelian philosophy seems to have limitations- confined to achieve happiness only. Although he does not advocate the philosophy of pleasure as the main good, still Aristotle says that purely bodily pleasures are good in moderation. Ansari while making a difference between Islamic concept of moderation and Aristotle's Golden Mean drew a major difference between the two. According to him, Aristotle's concept of mean is a rule and rule is not a special order or command, it fluctuates with the collateral circumstances of each situation and is subject to flexible reason¹.

Wasatiyyah literally means moderation, middle-path or midst of all the extremes. But looking carefully at the Qur'anic verses which mention the term, the meaning goes beyond the lexical meaning. Islamic scholars agree to justice, righteousness, goodness and tolerance being the literal meaning of the Qur'anic term *Wasatiyyah*. However, the most popular meaning of the term is *Moderation*. The term is used in connection with the Qur'anic phrase "*Ummatan Wasatan*" which refers to Muslim Nation having the attributes of justice, excellence and balance in order to serve as Allah's trustworthy "witness over mankind in this world and in the Hereafter":

And thus we have made you a just community (Ummatan Wasatan) that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you.

Al-Baghawi narrated in his Tafseer (1/122) that al-Kalbi said: Wasatan means the followers of the *wasat* religion, one that represents a middle path between exaggeration and negligence, because both are blameworthy in the matter of religion².

A just and moderate nation is an exemplary role model for mankind to follow. Its characteristics are criteria to recognize the truth and discern right from wrong. Within this context, a just and moderate nation serves as a witness over mankind as the Prophet is witness over them [Tafseer-e-Namonah, Vol. 1, page 488]. Hence, *Ummatan Wasatan* means a just and moderate nation and *Shaheed* is inferred to mean an exemplary role model³.

It is one of the outstanding features of Islamic life that it is free from extremes and justly balanced, for virtue to avoid the extremes on either side⁴. This justly balanced worldview of Islam has wide implications for contemporary Muslim society encompassing the Muslims' religiosity, spirituality, intellectuality, outlook, attitudes, behavior, relationships and activism⁵. The study of the term 'Wasatiyyah' has attracted the attention of many scholars in various fields such as linguistic, socio psychologies, and Islamic development and also in the area of religious contexts⁶. In an environment created by globalization and information affluence, the issue of moderation represents the primary concern of parents, educators, scholars, and leaders⁷. Wasatiyyah therefore is an Islamic principle for social life. Wasatiyyah has a strong link with the value of *akhlaq* (ethics) that has been embedded in the Muslim community⁸. It is an antidote to radicalism, ruggedness, injustice and relentlessness. It is a limit beyond which no believer is supposed to go. The spirits of moderation and tolerance have been put into prominent through the concept of Wasatiyyah by many Islamic Scholars across the globe to contain the bedeviling situations like religious conflicts, minority problems etc. Moderation in attitude towards everyone becomes vital especially for a multi-racial nation that is founded upon a diverse ethnic background in order to ensure that unity and harmony are maintained within a society.

Since the Qur'anic term *Wasatiyyah* is the cultivation of the mean between two extremes, Qur'an imparts it a deeper religious significance. The believer is asked not to spend too much as to become dependent on others or to withhold in such a way as to make oneself indifferent to woes of one's fellow beings.

And [they are] those who, when they spend, do so not excessively or sparingly but are ever, between that, [justly] moderate.

Again in social behavior a code of restraint is recommended. It is urged not to get provoked and concessions are given to the human weaknesses the model remains the image of a person who is ever ready to forgive and to restrain from anger when provoked. The concept of *wasat* or middle position is not an invariable quantum but has a dynamic flexibility. This means that Islam tries to develop a balanced view in all questions, be they of a metaphysical subtlety or human ethos, it does not allow anyone to overstep the limits. *La Ta'tadu*- the Qur'anic command is so general that the commentators have agreed that it includes prohibition of starting hostilities, fighting non-combatants, disproportionate response to aggression etc⁹. This Qur'anic injunction not to go beyond limits is the constant theme of the Qur'an. This is re-echoed and reflected in the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the Prophet has been heard saying, "the best way is moderation". The approach of Wasatiyyah also means practicing Islamic teachings in a holistic and perfect manner in each aspect an individual and a community life by increasing the quality of life of the *ummah* (community). This continuous improvement encompasses development in education, humanity, unity, economy and finance, law and order as well as defense¹⁰.

Religious Tolerance: Wasatiyyah is therefore a message of compassion that Islam offers to mankind in term of promoting moderation, tolerance, justice and peaceful co-existence between and among people of different racial, socio-cultural and ethno-religious backgrounds¹¹. Islam presents a policy of religious tolerance, rooted in teachings on the universal nature of man, his free relationship to God, and the divine origins of other religions¹². Tolerance is a widely accepted virtue related to human behavior especially where there are varying views, ideologies, faith, concepts and principles etc. Tolerance in this sense is one of the basic principles of Islam following the principle of Wasatiyyah as it is the best approach to reject extremism in all the spheres of human life. Nations with diverse religious faiths are more prone to religious extremism and riots. So moderation in attitude seems the only way to curb devastation resulting from religious extremism. Islam clearly lays emphasis on the rights of people from different religious faiths to maintain peace in the society. Qur'an says:

There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.

The Divine order found in above Qur'anic verse was implemented by the Prophet Himself in Madinah. The community of Madinah consisted of various ethnicities and religions living in peace and harmony upholding the Madinah Constitution which supported and celebrated the freedom in religion, justice for all and protection for the minority while giving freedom for the non Muslims to observe their religion¹³. Practicing of Wasatiyyah in multi-religious country, customs and cultural traditions according to is actually a practice that successfully founded, formed and developed society

with peace and prosperity, rooted in open practices, tolerate each another as commanded by religion¹⁴. Wasatiyyah is therefore a main value in a culture of tolerance¹⁵.

Justice: Intellectual integrity and objective scholarship require that in the discourse on *Wasatiyyah*, one should not forget to relate the qualities, attributes or values of balance or moderation to the basic qualities of justice (*adalah*), excellence/best (*Khairiyyah*) as explained by the well-established classical commentators of the Qur'an such as al-Tabari, al-Razi, al-Qurtubi or Ibn Khatir¹⁶.

The qualities (of *Ummatan Wasatan*) such as excellent in virtues and balanced are obviously inter-related with justice being the central idea. Justice means to place things in their rightful place and to treat others equally. It is one of the core moral virtues as per the Qur'anic and Hadith teachings. To be just is one of the praiseworthy attribute of human personality. Qur'an is replete with the importance and inculcation of a sense of justice both at personal and social level:

Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded.

O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what you do.

We have already sent Our messengers with clear evidences and sent down with them the Scripture and the balance that the people may maintain [their affairs] in justice.

And do not approach the orphan's property except in a way that is best until he reaches maturity. And give full measure and weight in justice. We do not charge any soul except [with that within] its capacity. And when you testify, be just, even if [it concerns] a near relative. And the covenant of Allah fulfill. This has He instructed you that you may remember.

CONCLUSION:

Praiseworthy characteristics of an individual lies between or in the middle of two blameworthy qualities, that is to say, generosity like quality lies between miserliness and extravagance. Humanity as a characteristic and moral virtue of humans has been commanded to avoid those traits which are blameworthy and against the moral rules of the God. The moderate and just actions uphold a balance (*mizan*). The Holy Qur'an clearly warns its believers not to disturb the balance created by God which will otherwise lead to catastrophe on this planet. Man as a vicegerent of God on the earth is expected to inculcate such qualities that will maintain this balance. Wasat or moderation contains a concept of 'means' and a 'limit' that has to be observed by a believer in all actions. Moderation thus is a straight path which God expects a believer to tread upon. Al-Bukhari

mentions a Hadith wherein it is said that, “O people remain straight upon the path and you will have taken a great lead, but if you swerve right or left then you will be lead astray.

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