Book Reviews


The powerful adjective ‘moderate’ (from which we derive the conceptual noun ‘moderation’) has a ubiquitous presence in our twenty-first century global discursive field of Islam. It is deployed by journalists, politicians, school teachers, police officers, academics, aid workers, and myriad other public and private actors to positively or negatively describe some property of Islam and/or Muslims. It always appears as an explicit or implicit dyadic antagonist to ‘radical’ or ‘extremist’ or ‘fundamentalist.’ As a conceptual modifier, the term moderate has become, to quote Reinhart Koselleck, an “inescapable, irreplaceable part of the political and social vocabulary.”¹ It is an instance of what Koselleck terms as ‘basic concept’ (Grundbegriffe). Such concepts’ integration of multifarious ‘experiences and expectations’ make them indispensable, highly complex, controversial and contested, which distinguishes them from technical terms located in specialised discourses.²

In my use of ‘basic concepts’ to understand the moderate I have departed from Koselleck in two ways. First, Koselleck’s conceptual history of German modernisation is restricted to a single, autonomous linguistic community rather than our current multilingual, Anglophone dominated global discourse.

² Ibid.
on Islam, politics, and identity. Second, his examples of concepts are single words and terms in the form of nouns, not adjectival modifiers. My justification derives from the conceptual focus and the socio-political context of the book under review. Unlike Koselleck’s German speaking communities and polities of the Sattelzeit (‘saddle-period’ or the transitional period to political modernity, roughly from 1750–1850), Muslim societies, across African and Euro-Asian continents, first encountered modernity through European colonisation, and then these societies variously resisted, appropriated, and eventually adapted themselves to the multiple modernities, emerging out of the colonial experience, in their continuing projects of socio-political and intellectual decolonisation.

This enterprise of decolonisation is the context of Mohammad Kamali’s simultaneous construction and reclamation of the concept of wasatiyyah as moderation. In his extensive conceptual analysis of wasatiyyah, over the course of seven chapters, Kamali comprehensively engages all scriptural instances the root *wa*-s- and its derivatives in the Qur’an and Hadith literature, and select classical, early modern, and contemporary commentators from among Sunni and Shi‘i interpretive communities. Following this erudite, and at times granular reading of scripture and Islamic intellectual traditions, in the second part of the book, Kamali provides stimulating exposition on fourteen ‘thematic manifestations of wasatiyyah’ over fifteen chapters; this ranges from the obvious topics of *hudud* ordinances and the implementation of shari‘ah, the laws of resistance and warfare vis-à-vis regional conflicts, occupation, and terrorism, to women’s rights, environmentalism, and current global financial precariousness and imbalances. In every case study, Kamali applies an updated Islamic virtue ethics by seeking the mean between two vices, conceived spatially as opposite extremes. Even in his choice of thinking partners, Kamali seeks out ecumenical harmony, what Shāh Wali Allāḥ (d. 1762) might recognise as *tatbīq*, rather than sectarian partisanship between Sunni and Shi‘i authorities, as well as traditionalist and modernist thinkers.

It is undoubtable that some of the partisans, subject to Kamali’s interpretive reconciliations, would judge their arguments to have been misconstrued for the purpose of forming a moral spectrum. This may be an inherent weakness in the dialectical logic of virtue ethics which seeks out the mean, or moderate position between two purported extremes. Kamali’s erudite adoption of this synthetic strategy signals to the reader that the intended readership of this book is the moral majority of Muslims fatigued

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3 The pivot of this analysis is the verse: َوَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسطًا لِّتَكُونُوا شَهِيدًا عَلَى الْنَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا—“Thus we have made of you a community justly balanced that you might be witnesses over the people and the Messenger a witness over yourselves.” Qur’an 2:143
and confused by contemporary polemical rivalries over the meaning and understanding of jihād, revival (tajdid), reform (islah), governance, human rights, and myriad other sites of contestations. While it is important to preach to the choir for the sake of retention, such an expositional strategy may not transform those in our Muslim communities who are most susceptible to partisan arguments—young people looking for Islamic heroism in all the wrong places.4

In the remaining part of this review, I will examine some of the rhetorical and interpretive choices in chapters nine and ten, respectively titled, “Moderation and Justice,” and “Moderation and Religiosity,” to understand these communicative limits and then offer some possible ways to overcome these barriers. Kamali unequivocally asserts in chapter nine “Justice is the closest conceptual synonym of wasatiyyah.”5 Later in the same paragraph, we learn, on the authority of Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī (d. 693), that even the Prophet (peace be on him) “interpreted the word wasatan (mid-most) in [the] verse (al-Baqara, 2:143), to mean justice (al-‘adl). Justice thus becomes synonymous with wasatiyyah in the sense that they both refer to a middle position between two or more opposing extremes.”6 This notion of middle-ness suggests a type of moderation that is between too-little and too-much rather than the cultivation of virtues, such as the ‘action-guiding’ virtue of justness persuasively articulated and grounded in richly sourced arguments throughout the book.

As suggested by a recent BBC report on the polling of British Muslims in the aftermath of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, the terms moderate Muslim and moderate Islam are too often advanced by hegemonic forces that seek to domesticate minoritised Muslims’ political orientations, and police their engagement and reaction to the latest anti-Muslim provocation or long standing political grievances stemming from the war on terror and regional wars in Asian and African Muslim societies.7 Kamali’s prioritising of moderation over justice—as the organising principle explicated from the Qur’ānic responsibility of Muslims to model for all of humanity a justly

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4 See pages 12–13 for Kamali’s awareness of Muslim alienation from the term moderate Muslim, due to its conscription by proponents of the “War on Terror.”
5 Kamali, The Middle Path, 84.
6 Ibid. Here as elsewhere through the book, Kamali leans on the redoubtable contemporary scholar Yusuf al-Qaraḍāwī for citation and analysis.
balanced community (ummatan wasatan)—centers this securitisation of discourse, and further amplifies Anglophone non-Muslim political anxieties. The danger in this approach, as Sherman Jackson has eloquently pointed out, is the potential of alienating at-risk Muslim masses by appearing to care more about “appeasing the government-media complex than in defending the integrity of Islam and Muslims.” 8 The tragic irony is the case of Muslim intellectuals and scholars, tasked and pressured by the “government-media complex” to disabuse Islam from the charge of violent extremism, unwittingly “losing the masses and thus consigning them to the very views that they are supposed to be displacing” by losing to the so-called radicals the battle over authenticity.

Authenticity, unfortunately, is often reduced to appearances, and within a textual context the two important markers of meaning production are rhetoric and the meta-textual framing of arguments. In chapter ten, Kamali begins the exposition on ‘moderation and religiosity’ by adumbrating a historical explanation for the emergence and flourishing of Islamic ‘radical fundamentalism.’ In this account, the general revival of Islam at the turn of the fifteenth Hijri century not only coincided with global resurgence of religion in the public sphere, it was instrumentalised as a new form of resistance in the wake of secular nationalism’s failure to meet the promises of decolonisation. Political radicalisation of the increasingly interconnected Islamic revival movements is a result of both internal failures of governance and external pressures of the Cold War. According to Kamali, this would have died out as political Islam gradually accommodated itself to legitimate social enterprises and political participation, e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwān al-Muslimīn) in Egypt and Jama‘at-i Islami (Jam‘at-i Islāmi) in Pakistan. Instead, the 9/11 attacks and in its wake the consequent conflagrations across the Muslim world not only invigorated al-Qaeda (al-Qā‘idah), they gave birth to increasingly brutal organisational innovations in the form of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Following this familiar narrative, Kamali offers interpretive correctives to militant understanding of warfare and resistance on the basis of the Qur’ān, the Sunnah, and the jurisprudential traditions of Sunnism and Shi‘ism. To be clear, the exegetical and juristic exposition are not only persuasive, they need widespread acceptance across the Muslim world. However, this turning away from the political to the cultural will undoubtedly suggest to many Muslim readers that the solution to the daily headline grabbing organised violence committed by Muslim political groups, such as al-Qā‘idah, al-Shābīb, and ISIS, has not been solved due to lack of correct understanding of religion or their

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insufficient acceptance among Muslims. The cost of this culture talk, which decouples religious reform from political reform of Muslim states and military interventions by global powers, is the attenuation of Kamali’s excellent, critical moral arguments for the virtue of a justly balanced communal existence. We must remember, as Jackson reminds us, “whether Islam actually functions on the ground as a religion of peace will depend as much on the actions of non-Muslims as it does on the religious understanding of Muslims.”

To be clear, the above criticisms of conceptualising wasatiyyah as moderation and the rhetorical depoliticisation of religious reform are meant to be constructive. Indeed, they seek to make explicit what is already implicit in The Middle Path of Moderation in two ways. First, the recommendation of a clearer double-critique of destructive Islamic arguments and the radicalising of Muslim communities in the hands of security-military policies imposed by global powers and Muslim governments is easily deducible from the text.

Second, Kamali’s broad conceptual exposition of the semantic field surrounding the root was-ta, as explicated from scriptures and Islamic interpretive traditions, along with the negative visceral connotations attached to the term moderate and moderation among critical sections of The Middle Path of Moderation’s global readership, undermines the singular concentration of this semantic field down to wasatiyyah as moderation. This critique, however, does not imply the need to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

The obvious fact that the text under review is written in English reminds us of that language’s global linguistic hegemony as the medium of communication within and across diverse cultural formations. Within the global Anglophone audience, and beyond, the notion of the moderate Muslim/Islam is both temporally and logically posterior to the radical/extremist/fundamentalist-Muslim/Islam. We must always be aware that concepts do not exist or operate in isolation, nor are they received outside of a conceptual field. Within the Anglophone field of meaning, the ‘moderate’ and moderation are marked by positional properties in relation to their opposite. It is undeniable that the semantic dynamic of denotation and connotation between the moderate and the radical is controlled more by London than Lahore.

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9 For the notion of ‘culture talk’ and its entailed perils of depoliticisation of Muslim socio-political identity, see Mahmood Mamdani, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror (New York: Random House Press, 2005).
In the context of this imbalance of cultural power to name and define the Muslim community, myriad Arabic texts have been issued to reclaim and reappropriate the concepts moderate/moderation through Qur’anic justification of wasatiyyah. Many of these books, written by contemporary stalwarts such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi (2004), and Muhammad al-Farfur (1988), are copiously cited by Kamali. As a text composed in English, with a breathtaking scope of thematic coverage, Kamali’s work deserves a much wider and a more interested reception than it will receive. There are at least two ways to mitigate this. Alparslan Açikgenç, in his insightful elucidation on the intentional inculcation of scientific knowledge into Islamic worldviews, has called attention to the responsibility of the intelligentsia (popular writers, artists, architects, public intellectuals) to concretise the knowledge production of scholars such as Mohammed Kamali. This concretised form of wasatiyyah can then be widely disseminated through popular avenues of educational institutions and mass media until the concept becomes fully Islamised and decoupled from the securitised discourse of the ‘moderate.’ In order to produce an authentic islamisation of wasatiyyah as a basic concept of Muslim worldviews, the values and practices related to wasatiyyah, as outlined by Kamali, need to be integrated with the already existing virtuous practices associated with justice and balance within the Muslim ethical habitus.¹²

We have seen, in the past century, a successful integration of high-minded ‘ulamā’ discourse of reform into a large section of popular Muslim worldview in the case of the Tablíghí Jamā’at. There is no reason to doubt that the moral lessons of The Middle Path of Moderation can be adapted by the classes of Muslim intelligentsia and mass cultural influencers. Such an adaptation can play an integral part toward rebalancing Muslim ethical discourse and practice if and only if Muslim civil societies have the will-power and capacity to withstand the myriad destructive external and internal compulsions confronting them. This book is an essential reading for intellectuals, educators, and cultural influencers interested in healing our fractured Muslim worlds.

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¹² For Açikgenç’s discussion on the integration of Islamic sciences and popular Muslim worldview, see Alparslan Açikgenç, Islamic Science: Towards a Definition (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996).