

## The Excesses of Moderation

*Colloquium on “‘Moderate’ Islam”*

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I was persuaded to come out here at rather short notice by the promise of a dialogue on some of the issues professor Bernard Weiss has raised in his conceptually nuanced and politically canny essay on “moderate Islam.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, I found it to be such a compelling articulation of key themes that I have focused my own comments around it. (So that we are clear, I am referring to the first draft which has a different slant than the later ones.)

My commentary engages the political rather than the theological aspects of the debate on “moderate Islam” and it specifies the problems and the possibilities inherent in two very different approaches to Islam, one that I am calling the official US position and the other simply a Muslim one. I should note that the official perspective also reflects the thinking of most US citizens who support the administration’s policies, so I use the term broadly.

In part, this focus reflects my disciplinary bias. As someone who comes to the study of religion through the conceptual lens of politics, I am very mindful of the relationship between structures of power and the interpretation and practice of religion both in states where religion and politics intersect in obvious ways and in those that are designed to sustain the separation of church and state. In actuality, of course, religion and politics are inseparable even in secular states though this does not mean that they are therefore simply reducible to one another even in states where they exist in open symbiosis.

I make this point because of the tendency to represent Muslim identity as irreducibly religious, as if we cannot have a will, desire, agency, consciousness, or purpose that are fundamentally political just because we look to religion to lend meaning to our lives. I want, therefore, to recuperate some sense of Muslim political identity in my talk.

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In part, my focus derives from a deep discomfort with the tendency to explain 9/11 in terms of “what went wrong with Islam” while ignoring the impact of US policies on large parts of the world. Moreover, if Washington’s sponsorship of “moderate Islam” is suspect, why put the onus on Muslims to clarify the “interpretive principles and scriptural arguments [that] moderate Islam [can] marshal” on its own behalf?<sup>2</sup> Why not question the nature of Washington’s interest in “moderate Islam” and its attempts to enlist religion as an instrument of US foreign policy?

Lastly, while it may be true, as professor Weiss says, that “How Muslims relate to each other is profoundly connected with how they relate to the West, and especially to the United States,” is it not equally true that how the US and the West relate to Muslims will determine their own future as well? (For heuristic reasons let us momentarily accept the untenable proposition that the West and the US exclude Muslims.) Indeed, it is my conviction that Washington’s backing of “moderate Islam” will have repercussions not only for Muslims but also for non-Muslims, national politics, and the state that leads me also to focus on the politics of the current debate on “moderate Islam.”

## **I. US–non-Muslim perspectives on moderation**

Since what has brought us to this colloquium is in large measure 9/11, I want to begin with some observations about it so as to provide a context for my analysis.

Not a single person I have talked to in the years since 9/11 has failed to condemn the terrorists, but few have wanted to entertain the possibility that real political grievances might have had something to do with their actions, or that, as the world’s paramount hegemon, the US bears some responsibility for the conditions that are generating certain sorts of grievances in the first place.

Fewer still have been willing to criticize the deadly wars of attrition that the US has unleashed in response to 9/11 against equally hapless Muslim civilians abroad, as if the only imaginable recourse was to have drawn that much-vaunted line between us/them, good/evil, Islam/West before embarking on the destructive ventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. (The fact that not one member of the Taliban or a single Iraqi was involved in 9/11 seems not to have given anyone in the administration much pause.)

Truthfully, however, Americans *could* have let 9/11 open up a very different path for them. Taking their lead from innumerable other tragedies

around the world, including a 9/11 of their own making in Chile thirty years earlier, they could have embraced what the rest of the world has always known, as Chilean writer Ariel Dorfmann passionately urged. And what the world knows is that no one's suffering is unique or exclusive; if anything, it is a marker of our common humanity. But rather than look into the mirror of that shared humanity, the US chose to entrench itself even more intractably behind the ideology of its own exceptionalism in its rush to war, initially dubbed a "crusade."

As the indiscriminate killing got under way abroad and the roll-back in civil rights began at home, the "entire Washington establishment, anxious not to give the impression ... that it regards Islam as the enemy," scrambled to distinguish good from bad Muslims, or, in its language, moderate from militant Islam. To this end, notes professor Weiss, it began pushing the idea that "Moderate Islam is friendly Islam, peaceful Islam, the Islam that promotes good citizenship and that takes a clear stand against all forms of terrorism *as defined by Washington*" (my emphasis).

Such a view involved fudging the sharp line Mr. Bush had drawn between "us and them" so that "us" no longer meant only non-Muslim Americans, as his use of the word crusade had at first suggested. Rather, "us" now included Muslims, both US and non-US, albeit only those deemed moderate. Likewise, "them" was now expanded beyond non-US Muslim militants to incorporate actual or suspected American sympathizers as well.

This re-grouping made it clear that not all Muslims are guilty just because they are Muslim and nor are all Americans innocent just because they are American; nor indeed are Americans and Muslims always mutually exclusive. And yet the re-mapping did little to challenge the administration's bogey-man view of the world as revolving on an axis of good/evil with only the US enjoying enough moral superiority to rotate everlastingly on the axis of good, in spite of the presence of extremists within it, and Islam permanently impaled on the axis of evil in spite of there being more moderate than extremist Muslims.

I will not speculate on the insecurities that foster such a one-dimensional view of oneself and others, but I do want to comment on the political function of the good/evil, moderate/militant binaries that underpin official representations of Islam.

References to a militant Islam and a moderate Islam, a peaceful Islam and a violent Islam, an Islam that is the US's mortal foe and an Islam that is its trusted friend suggest that, in the end, the problem of violence is not even partly of the US's making; rather it is a problem of a schizophrenic

Islam that is pathologically and unpredictably one thing in one breath and its exact opposite in the next. (Incidentally, some Muslim intellectuals also like to frame interpretive differences as a struggle of Islam vs. Islam, but putting it this way collapses Islam with Muslims and ignores that a religion is necessarily more than the sum of its practice and that it always has the potential to be better.)

The official view of Islam as a pair of good and evil twins conjoined at the hip performs two crucial political functions. On the one hand, by portraying “militant Islam” as the real threat to global security, Washington is able to deflect critiques of the US’s role in underwriting injustice and oppression on a global scale. On the other hand, by shifting the burden of “defeat[ing] and eradicat[ing] militant Islam”<sup>3</sup> onto “moderate Islam,” the US is absolved of the responsibility to rethink its own injurious policies. (Incidentally, drafting “moderate Islam” on its side does not mean empowering Muslims or really rehabilitating Islam. Indeed, Washington’s embrace of “moderate Islam” comes at a high cost. Since friends can and do differ, the administration wants “moderate Islam” not so much to be an independently-minded ally as it obedient and unquestioning henchman.)

This new agenda for Islam has involved the secular state in defining religious meaning, much like the so-called fundamentalist Muslim states we decry here for the same reason. By labeling some readings and practices of Islam militant and others moderate on the sole basis of how well they serve the US’s perceived “national interests,” the administration has legitimized the use of religion as a declared instrument of state policy.

One consequence of this is that the arena within which Muslims will be able to practice their religion in the future will increasingly come under state surveillance and control. In fact, by punishing some practices and rewarding others, public policy will also impact how Muslims think about Islam. That is why the attempt to control public practices impinges also on private convictions inasmuch public practices are not independent of privately held beliefs. Yet, it is precisely this “moderation” of religious beliefs that secularism seeks to prevent by removing religion from the domain of state regulation.

As such, another consequence of the administration’s self-serving and instrumentalist attitude to Islam will be to weaken the secular underpinnings of the US state, just as its assault on civil rights and liberties will undermine the state’s democratic and putatively liberal character. What is at stake in Washington’s attempts to promote a “moderate Islam,” then, is not only the Muslim relationship with Islam, but the very nature of the sec-

ular democratic state whose future may be equally imperiled in the process. (The same dynamic can be expected to play itself out in France as well.)

This is an immoderately high price to pay for a strategy that can only fail in the end. It will fail because at the root of terrorism is not a misplaced US-envy on the part of Muslims but deep inequities and repression that cannot be remedied through warfare. This strategy will also fail because the US's attempt to establish a definitional monopoly over Islam is tarnishing the very Muslims who are challenging interpretive extremism by raising questions about their integrity and independence. Indeed, lured on by personal ambition and the plentiful subsidies being doled out by the government, many Muslims are jumping aboard "the bandwagon of 'moderation,'" in professor Weiss's delectably circumspect language. Some would say more plainly that they are turning "native informants."

If calling oneself a moderate at a time when there is such pressure to "toe the official line" can thus "easily become too much a badge of mindless loyalty,"<sup>4</sup> refusing to call oneself a moderate can just as easily become a sign of disloyalty. Either way, the state's advocacy of "moderate Islam" is a kiss of death for Muslim Americans who are caught between the cynicism of Muslim critics abroad, wary of the US's agendas, and of non-Muslim critics at home who are convinced that a moderate Muslim is merely a militant Muslim in denial or in disguise.

As such, whatever discursive openings may have resulted from the administration's rehabilitation of "moderate Islam," have not been transformed into real political gains for Muslims. To the contrary, the ground on which we are standing is shrinking ever more rapidly, even as the expectations of us are growing ever more cumbersome.

## **II. A Muslim perspective on Islam**

I want to shift focus now and speak about a Muslim perspective on Islam, my own, but without getting into whether or not this perspective, or I, should be regarded as moderate.

I have avoided defining moderation or extremism for some of the reasons professor Weiss identifies in his essay. While post 9/11 extremists are the terrorists and moderates those who renounce terrorism, he says, how are we to define terrorism and moderation?

Not all acts of violence count as terrorism [he points out. On the other hand] Does moderation entail a repudiation of violence altogether? Does it entail a repudiation of violence as a means of achieving political ends in contrast to working within the political system to achieve those ends? Or

does it apply to the ends themselves? Can a person or group working within the system to bring about an Islamic state be considered a moderate, or does moderation entail rejection of the idea of an Islamic state? Is there such a thing as a moderate form of . . . political Islam?<sup>5</sup>

To these questions, professor Weiss has added several others in his third draft but even though these issues are all worth debating, I did not address them today because, as I pointed out at the start of my talk, I wanted to shift the focus from the problem of Islam to the problem of focusing on Islam every time we talk about the “war on terrorism.”

This does not mean, however, that I am not invested in a moderate reading of Islam, if by that we mean an avoidance of extremes and excesses, for that is what the Qur’an itself enjoins and there is a rich and complex Muslim legacy on which we can draw in such an endeavor. Indeed, I believe that one of the most urgent tasks facing us today is to re-think our understanding of the Qur’an’s teachings on women and sexual equality which we interpret as authorizing male dominion over women, even if by a single degree.

My own reading of the Qur’an suggests that not only does it not sanctify male privilege, but that it opposes patriarchy whether we define it narrowly as a form of father-right or more broadly as a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges men over women in their biological capacity as males. The Qur’an, however, does not espouse a view of sexual difference that should lead us to derive a theory of gender inequality from its teachings. To the contrary, it establishes that sexual equality is ontological in nature.<sup>6</sup>

I also argue that our very understanding of God militates against reading the Qur’an as a patriarchal text or as advocating patriarchy. This part of my argument runs as follows: since the Qur’an is divine discourse, we must begin our reading of it with a sound theological understanding of God. In this context, I point out that there are many signs of divine self-disclosure in the Qur’an that can provide the hermeneutic keys for reading it.

For instance, the Qur’an establishes that God is one and God’s sovereignty is indivisible. To my mind, this means we should not read the Qur’an as designating men as guardians over women or as intermediaries between God and women since this allows them to claim rights that belong to God alone, such as those of complete obedience.

Similarly, the Qur’an teaches that God is just and does not transgress against the rights of human beings. As such, I believe that we should not read the Qur’an as allowing men to transgress against women’s rights by treating them unequally, as happens in patriarchies. Likewise, the Qur’an tells us that God is unrepresentable, which suggests that masculinist refer-

ences to God are bad linguistic conventions and not accurate statements about divine reality. This is an important point because masculinist representations of God also underwrite male claims to privilege.

I should also note that I arrive at my reading of the Qur'an by employing a method I derive from the Qur'an itself, in particular, its injunction to read it for its best meanings and as a thematic and hermeneutic unity rather than piecemeal or in a selective and decontextualized way.

My argument is, of course, more sophisticated and complex than I can convey in a few sentences and in mentioning it, I wanted to illustrate only that many Muslims already are engaged in contesting interpretive violence and in proposing alternative understandings of Islam. I believe such efforts are more likely to benefit Muslims because the ethical commitments that impel such internal critiques are qualitatively different than the self-seeking and quixotic pursuit of "moderate Islam" as Washington has defined it.

Sadly, however, not many Americans were interested in such project before 9/11 and getting my work published was a struggle. 9/11, of course, changed that and soon after my book came out, a State Department official called me, wanting to know if I would talk (via video) with a group of Muslim women in India who, she said, were interested in the same issues I am. So I agreed. Some months later, in an article in the *Washington Post*, Robert Satloff harshly criticized the State Department for giving a platform to voices that, he said, speak "against us."<sup>7</sup> He listed me as one of those anti-American voices on the grounds that I regularly criticize the administration's policies.

The irony of this has never escaped me. For criticizing Muslim interpretive violence, I am courted as a moderate Muslim but, for criticizing the US's political violence, I am denounced as a militant anti-American. Where then is the space for Muslim-Americans like me to live in accordance with our religious and political principles and beliefs?

I suspect that we will not be able to find this space unless we are willing to ask the same sorts of questions of the US and of ourselves as US citizens as professor Weiss would have us ask of ourselves as Muslims. For instance, is violence done in the name of secular values different from the violence done in the name of a religious millennialism? Is there a moderate form of secularism? Can liberalism accommodate real differences? Can US foreign policies allow us "to live in peace with people different from ourselves, people who may not choose to live as we do or to organize their societies along western lines, but who are nonetheless fully human and deserving of respect and dignity?"<sup>8</sup>

**Endnotes**

1. Bernard Weiss, "Thoughts on Moderate Islam," February 4, 2004, via email.
2. Weiss, *ibid.*
3. Weiss, *ibid.*
4. Weiss, *ibid.*
5. Weiss, *ibid.*
6. Asma Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).
7. Robert Satloff, "Voices Who Speak for (and Against) Us," *Washington Post*, December 1, 2002, B04.
8. Tarak Barkawi, "On the Pedagogy of 'Small Wars,'" *International Affairs*, 80, 1 (2004) 19-38.