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Laxity, Moderation and Extremism

I have chosen this topic because I think it is a very important issue for us to address today, and yet we seldom address it.

Why is it so important, and why do we seldom address it?

It is important because it affects our relationship with one another as brothers and sisters in a Muslim community. It is also important because it affects our relationships with non-Muslims, and thus the spread of Islam. These issues are crucial for the future of the Muslim Ummah.

Why then do we seldom speak about it? Because to do so is to run the risk of being abused, misunderstood, and quoted out of context, by people who cannot tolerate any opinion other than their own, even if that other opinion has a sound basis in Islamic teachings.

It should be understood that I am talking about extreme positions in general. "If the cap fits, wear it" - as the saying goes. If it does not fit, then the reference is to someone else's cap.

For much of what follows I am deeply indebted to Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a well-known scholar and author of the book "The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam". He has written another excellent book called "Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism", published by the International Institute of Islamic Thought. This book has effectively covered the topic and brought to light many useful references from the Qur'an, the Hadith and other historical sources. A lot of my paper is summary and quotation from Dr. al-Qaradawi's book.

It is I think essential to define the terms used in the title of this paper: **Laxity, Moderation and Extremism**. The definition of Laxity is easy. It means carelessness and looseness. Laxity in Islam means failure to follow the basic teachings - negligence of the prescribed acts of worship and failure to submit to the moral guidance of the Shari'ah in respect of various aspects of the Islamic way of life. This may be due to ignorance, weakness, upbringing, social pressure, or lack of understanding of the moral principles and the wisdom underlying Islamic injunctions and prohibitions. "Laxity" refers not to those who have consciously rejected Islam. It refers to those who believe in God but do not avail themselves of His guidance. This condition can therefore often be cured by tactful da'wah and reasoned discussion whereby the careless person learns to care about his or her relationship with God and with other people.

What then is "moderation" in Islam? Moderation means to carry out to the best of one's ability what Allah has prescribed and to avoid what He has forbidden, to understand the wisdom of Allah's Laws and moral guidance and to grasp and apply the basic Islamic principles to every new situation as it arises. Having complied with the compulsory aspects of worship and moral discipline, a moderate person may if he is so inclined, attempt to purify himself and come closer to Allah by supererogatory acts of worship in the form of voluntary prayers, fasting, charity, Hajj, Umrah, dhikr-Allah and loving conduct towards other people. The way and the degree to which he does these depends on number of things including his natural temperament, his understanding and his level of Iman. "Moderation" therefore covers a wide range of spiritual states.

According to a number of Ahadith, the Prophet (pbuh) praised those who adopted a moderate approach to worship. Worship, he said, should be done with freshness of heart, not as

an exhausting routine carried on in spite of fatigue. Therefore various provisions were made in the Qur'an and Hadith to ease things for travellers, for the sick, for pregnant or nursing women, for the old, for the poor, because "Allah does not wish to place a burden on you greater than you can bear".

The word "moderate" is sometimes taken to mean "only half-committed". This is a mistake. A moderate may be just as deeply committed as an extremist, but he fulfils his commitment in a different way. It is therefore not the case that a lax person scores between 10 - 30%, a moderate person between 31 - 60% and an extremist between 61 - 90%. There may be some excess that an "extremist" commits that could bring his score down far below that of the moderate, as we shall discuss later. Moderation is therefore not a matter of commitment to Islam, or lack of it, but of how to practise Islam, how to interpret and apply its teachings, how to relate to other people and how to go about calling other people to the truth.

I was struck by the high level of tolerance on the part of Muslims - a tolerance that seemed sometimes to stem from simplicity and lack of awareness. Students in schools were still generally being taught their religion by traditional Mallams. Islam meant how to perform prayers, the rules of fasting, memorization of the Qur'an and so on. Christians were a minority who posed little threat and they enjoyed much tolerance from the Muslims.

Within a decade the situation began to change. Students now began to get their knowledge of Islam from a variety of sources - young teachers, a variety of books in English, and a great number of magazines and newspaper articles. They also began to follow Islamic programmes on the radio and television, some of them well-informed, some not. In addition they learned from lectures and camps organized by the Muslim Students Society and other Islamic organizations, who would invite anyone with Islamic interest to give lectures. Many young students themselves

gave lectures and conducted group studies of the Qur'an and Hadith. This is the common pattern of learning until today. It is the age of the amateur in Islamic Studies and anyone can stand up and have a go, even those with very limited knowledge.

The outcome of this has its good and its bad side. On the good side, young Muslims have come to realise that Islam is not just prayers, fasting and memorization of the Qur'an. They have a much broader idea of the implications of Islam as a way of life, together with its social, economic and political teachings. The interest generated by these discoveries has brought about a reawakening among Muslim youth, and many of them, with the enthusiasm and the dedication of youth, have identified themselves with the Islamic cause and tried to conduct their lives on Islamic principles.

But the re-awakening also has its dangerous side. Students have become confused and often divided through being exposed to such a variety of information and views from so many different sources. Young Muslims with poor standards of general education and no firm grounding in Islam can hardly be expected to possess a clear judgement with which to assess what they read or are told about Islam. Consequently they could be easily led, by those who pose to have knowledge, to take up positions of extremism and intolerance, not only towards non-Muslims but also towards fellow-Muslims who might not conform to their newly-acquired concept of Islam. Those who do not hold the same idea or possess the same fervour could be regarded as hypocrites or even unbelievers, instead of brothers and sisters sharing the same faith.

3. What then is meant by "extremism"? It is important to be clear about the definition, because the word is often used improperly to describe anyone who is committed to follow the basic well-known teachings of Islam.

To quote Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi:

"Literally, extremism means being situated at the farthest possible point from the centre. Figuratively indicates a similar remoteness in religion, in thought, as well as behaviour. One the main consequences of extremism is exposure to danger and insecurity. Islam, therefore recommends moderation and balance in everything: in belief, 'ibadah, conduct and legislation. This is the straightforward path that Allah (SWT) calls al-Sirat al-Mustaqim, one distinct from all the others which are followed by those who earn Allah's anger and those who go astray. Moderation, or balance, is not only a general characteristic of Islam, it is a fundamental landmark, as mentioned in Quran 2:143 which says "We have made you an Umrnah justly balanced "

Islamic texts call upon Muslims to exercise moderation and to reject and oppose all kinds of extremism: ghuluwwu (excessiveness), and tashdid (bigotry). For example the Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said:

"Beware of excessiveness in religion. (People) before you have perished as a result of (such) excessiveness". (Hadith from Ahmad, Nasai and Ibn Majah.) In other words excess may eventually develop into a large problem and even become a threat to the well being and security of the Ummah.

According to another Hadith. the Prophet (pbuh) said:

"Ruined were those who indulged in hair splitting", and he repeated it 3 times (Muslim). Imam An-Nawawi commented that this referred to those who were excessive in utterance and action, resulting in loss of this life and the Hereafter .

According to Ahadith, the Prophet (SA' AS) said:

"Verily this religion is easy, and none shall be severe in religion but it will overcome him: he shall turn it into a stone and make it a tomb" (Bukhari)

"Do not over burden yourself, lest you perish. People (before you) over burdened themselves and perished. Their remains are found in hermitages and monasteries". (Hadith from Muslim and Abu Dawud).

The Prophet (pbuh) always resisted any tendency towards religious excess, even in Ibadah. Numerous Ahadith testify to this. Islam seeks to create a balance between the needs of the body and those of the soul, between this world and the Hereafter, between the right of man to live life to its full, and his duty to worship and obey his Creator.

The forms of Ibadah is Islam purify the soul and establish harmony and brotherhood in the community, without hindering the building of culture and civilization. Muslims are to pray for "the good in this world and the good in the Hereafter." (Qur'an 2:201).

If Allah does not wish us to be extreme in our worship on Him - which was the reason for our creation - there is no reason to believe He wants us to be extreme in our conduct towards one another, or in other aspects of our life.

The Qur'an in a Makkan revelation speaks of enjoyment of life;

"O children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer. Eat and drink but waste not by excess, for Allah loves not those who waste. Say: who has forbidden the beautiful gifts of Allah which He has produced for His servants and the things clean and pure which He has provided for sustenance?" (Qur'an 7:30-32) And in a Madinah revelation:

"O you who believe! Make not unlawful the good things Allah has made lawful to you. But commit no excess, for Allah does not like those given to excess. Eat of the things which Allah has provided you, lawful and good, but fear Allah, in whom you believe." (Qur'an 4:86-88).

The Sunnah emphasises that people should give due right to their Lord, to themselves, to their families and to other people. All these warnings are necessary because there is something inherently wrong with excessiveness and extremism. Firstly, it is too repulsive for ordinary human nature to endure or tolerate. The majority could never put up with excessiveness, even if a few could do so for a short time. The Shari'ah addresses the whole of humanity, not just a special group who have a unique capacity for endurance. Once Mu'adh led prayer and prolonged it, and some people complained to the Prophet (pbuh). The Prophet said to him: "O Mu'adh! Are you putting the people on trial?" and repeated it 3 times.

On another occasion he spoke with anger to an Imam saying: "Some of you make people dislike good deeds (Salah). So whoever among you leads people in Salah should shorten it because among them are the weak, the old and the one who has business to attend to", (Bukhari) When the Prophet sent Mu'adh and Abu Musa to Yemen, he gave them the following advice: "Facilitate (religious matters to people) and do not make (things) difficult. Obey each other and do not differ (among yourselves) ." (Bukhari and Muslim.)

Secondly, excessiveness tends to be shortlived. Al-Qaradawi says:

"I have often met people who were known for their strictness and extremism; then I lost contact with them for a while. When I enquired about them after a period of time, I found out that they had either deviated or taken the opposite extreme or at least lagged behind " So the Prophet (pbuh) said: "Do those deeds which you can do easily, as Allah will not get tired (of giving rewards) till you get bored and tired (of performing religious deeds) ... and the most beloved deed to Allah is the one which is done regularly even if it were little." (Bukhari and Muslim.)

The third defect of excess is that it is often at someone else's expense - that is, someone else is likely to suffer neglect or inconvenience as a result of the extremists' pre-occupation with

doing more than others.

If extremism refers to whatever is furthest from the centre or the middle course, and it was condemned in the Qur'an and by the Prophet, it is important to distinguish where lies the middle course and where lies the extreme. People's perceptions of this are bound to differ. Obviously personal piety, family background and the environment affect our perceptions of what is extreme, moderate or lax.

For example, people brought up in a strict Muslim environment tend to regard any deviation with horror and aversion. At the other extreme are some whose background is so un-Islamic that they regard even minimal adherence to Islam as a kind of extremism. They express surprise at someone who prays 5 times a day, cast doubt over what is clearly haram, and even regard the wearing of hijab as "extremism".

MANIFESTATIONS OF EXTREMISM

Let us therefore look for some of the manifestations of what could clearly be identified as extremism. The following are among them:

1. Bigotry - that is the extremist's belief that he is right and cannot be wrong. He regards anyone who differs from him as an enemy or at best an ignorant person. He cannot tolerate differences of opinion. AI-Qaradawi remarks:
"This becomes critical when he develops a tendency to coerce others, not necessarily physically but by accusing them of bid'ah, wantonness, unbelief and deviation. Such intellectual terrorism is more terrifying than physical terrorism."
2. Commitment to excessiveness in all things, with attempts to force others to do likewise, despite good reasons for Islam having made things easy. As the Qur'an says: "Allah intends every facility for you: He does not want to put you in difficulties." (Qur'an 2:185).

3. Sternness without consideration of time or place - for example causing difficulties for converts in unIslamic societies and pursuing controversies over such matters, as dress, sitting on the floor instead of on chairs, eating on the floor and so on, and insisting everyone must comply with their wish. Moreover, those who initiate and sustain such bitter controversies over matters of detail are often well known for their negligence of essential religious duties to their parents, wives, children and neighbours.
4. Linked to this is ill-mannered treatment of people, and a crude approach to calling people to Islam - which generally serves to frighten them away rather than draw them closer.
5. Suspicion - the extremist is always ready to accuse people and jump to conclusions of guilt the moment he suspects a person of anything, contrary to the spirit and teachings of Islam which encourage Muslims to think well of others. If anyone tries to state a moderate and authentically Islam position, the extremist accuses him of transgression, laxity, westernization, disrespect for the Sunnah, or even of disbelief.

Allah says: "O you who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible): for suspicion in some cases is a sin." (Qur'an 49:12) Such suspicion is related to pride, the first act of disobedience of Satan who claimed: "I am better than he is." (Qur'an 38:76).

CAUSES OF EXTREMISM

Extremism does not originate by chance. It must have its causes. It should be realised that such a complex phenomenon has numerous causes direct and indirect, some recent and some going far back in time.

1. The first cause of extremism is lack of knowledge of and insight into the underlying purposes, spirit and essence of the religion. Some extremists who claim to be versed in religion lose sight of the underlying purpose and essence of Islam. They insist on total literal application of certain Ahadith without consideration of the circumstances in the contemporary world under which they are applied.

Dr. Al-Qaradawi gives several examples of this. One is the Hadith in which the Prophet advised against carrying a copy of the Qur'an into the land of the Kuffar. If we look at the reason underlying this prohibition, we conclude that it was his concern that in the war-situation of the time, the Kuffar might desecrate or harm the Qur'an if it fell into their hands. This is not normally the situation nowadays Muslims travel all over the world carrying their Qur'ans for personal reading without fear of desecration. Moreover availability of Qur'ans with translations into many languages is nowadays an important part of Da'wah in many non-Muslims countries, and a cause of their people embracing Islam.

A second example is a Hadith which forbids a Muslim husband, returning to his family after long absence, from coming home in the night. There may be two reasons for this: firstly to avoid giving the impression he suspects his wife and he is trying to catch her unawares; secondly, to give her time to prepare herself and the house to receive him. Nowadays a telephone call, letter or telegram can inform a wife of his expected time of arrival. Moreover, modern modes of travel often necessitate arrival by night, and few people would insist a husband should go and stay in a nearby hotel for a night in order to comply with the Hadith and arrive by daylight.

The Hadith at that time was meant to solve a problem. If applied nowadays, it could often create a problem where none exists. Yet there are some people who fail to grasp the underlying motive of such Hadith. As Dr. al-Qaradawi remarks: "This intellectual shallowness leads to endless conflicts over marginal issues" such as beards, turbans, length of dress, photographs, minor optional details of worship, and excessive extension of prohibitions which make life difficult for people.

Another aspect of this shallowness of knowledge is the inability to distinguish between major and minor degrees of kufur, shirk or hypocrisy without any consideration to a person's inner motives, and wrong interpretation of allegorical texts of the Qur'an and Hadith.

Most of these problems of young extremists arise because they have not been taught by reliable 'ulama'. They have received semi-knowledge directly from books and newspapers, preachers and so-called "activists" who were themselves in some cases not properly taught.

2. A second cause of extremism is lack of insight into reality and history as well as Allah's sunnah or way of dealing with in His creation. This causes people to demand the impossible. They want to change the whole fabric of society - its thoughts, traditions, ethics, social, political and economic system by means unrelated to reality. They may show great courage and disregard for personal consequences, but without insight into the nature of reality their sacrifices are doomed to fail. The concept of a "step-by-step" approach, which was adopted by the Prophet (pbuh) in Makkah has no appeal. By contrast the extremist wants immediate and complete transformation, and has no time for allowing long-term strategies to mature. In the absence of support from the majority of Muslims, he may resort to force or precipitate a crisis even though it may cause a setback to the long term cause of Islam.

3. A third cause of extremism is its opposite - laxity indifference to Islamic values and corruption as seen in the society around us - particularly when those in authority fail to take the obvious and necessary steps to control it for the general good for the society.

The laws of the land are not necessarily based on the Shari'ah, the gap grows between rich and poor, and social injustice becomes more and more evident. Young Muslims witness these things and feel powerless. They are not in a position to "change things with their hands" as they have no authority to do so. They lack experience to know how to go about "changing things with their tongues" so they bottle up their frustrations in their hearts until sometimes it boils over. For this some are duly punished resulting in further frustration.

Likewise on the international scene they feel powerless in the face of suppression of Muslims in many parts of the world. This generates a general feeling of resentment of all non-Muslim foreigners and a suspicion of everything foreign, including modern knowledge - irrespective of the guilt or otherwise of the foreigners concerned or the usefulness of the knowledge to Muslims.

THE REMEDIES FOR EXTREMISM

Having identified some of the symptoms and diagnosed some of the causes of extremism, what of the remedies?

The first step of a predominantly Muslim community must be to acknowledge and confirm its genuine commitment to Islam not through slogans or constitutional clauses but by practical adherence to Islamic principles in the conduct of public affairs. This must be done with full commitment both to Islam and to the religious rights of non-Muslim minorities. This type of commitment to Islamic values by the Government at least in predominantly Muslim areas would certainly win a response from the general public, channel youthful idealism into useful directions and thus bring about greater stability. It is necessary therefore to conduct well reasoned da'wah among people in government and administration.

Secondly, older people should show a greater understanding towards our youth, and have frequent and open discussion with them. They need patient treatment on an intellectual level. You cannot fight obstinacy with obstinacy or bigotry with another bigotry. Nor should we condemn religious extremism yet keep silent about religious laxity. Freedom of expression must be defended and rational discussion used to bring order and sense to confused minds.

Thirdly, steps must be taken to increase youth's indepth understanding of how to interpret the Qur'an and the Hadith so as to achieve a true insight into the Shari'ah.

Those who have this knowledge and insight must make it a duty to teach young Muslims on a regular basis, otherwise they will fall into the hands of half baked "Sheikhs" of shallow knowledge and little insight. Islamic organizations should give much attention to the training of youth, making clear to them the following points:

1. A verse of the Qur'an or a Hadith cannot be taken in isolation as an authority without reference to other verses and other Hadith that may elaborate, explain and qualify it. This is a field requiring expert knowledge.
2. It is necessary to distinguish between the eternal and unalterable principles of Islam and other teachings which are directed to particular needs.
3. It is necessary to take into account the diversity of our society. Social change and technological progress has increased the admixture of people from many different communities within nations. This applies not only to the mixture of Muslims and non-Muslims who must learn to live together, but even between Muslims and other Muslims.

Our community therefore includes the strong and the weak, the learned and the ignorant, the highly motivated and the poorly motivated, males and females, old and young, and they cannot all achieve the same standards in their understanding of and commitment to the application of Islam. This diversity should be taken into account in our attempts to guide others, or give a fatwa.

What we may find easy might be unbearably hard for some others. Therefore even an Islamic administration would not be advised to impose extreme standards on all.

As Dr. al-Qaradawi says:

"A Muslim who seeks Allah's pleasure can choose to place restrictions on himself and stick to the most extreme and hard line opinions in his endeavour. But can any Ministry of Interior - a passport, immigration or traffic or police department - do without photographs which have become the most important means of discovering and preventing crimes and forgery?"

Can Science or Medicine be taught or practised without pictures and photography? And what of satellite pictures for defence and weather forecasting? Can any contemporary state ignore the times it exists in and deprive its subjects of the incredible services of television relying only on the radio, on the grounds that television depends upon photography which is 'haram as some students of religious education argue these days? In short, a person's restrictions on himself can be tolerated and accepted, but it would be intolerable and unacceptable to force them on the various groups in the community as a whole. The Prophet himself (pbuh) emphasised making things easy for the sake of the weaker members of the Ummah, as when he ordered those leading prayer to "shorten it for the sake of the old, the weak and those who have business to attend to".

Differences of opinion were recognized as blessings by the early Muslims and the great scholars of old. They held varied opinions on many issues and did not make this a cause of ill-feeling and disunity between them. Such differences of opinion always existed and always will exist as they are a natural part of man's God-given nature. Any attempt to eradicate them will therefore fail and cause more harm than good. Rather we must learn the 'Adab al-Khilaf (The Ethics of Disagreement) as inherited from our early 'ulama'.

Dr. al-Qaradawi comments:

"In this respect I feel inclined to admit that the only religious leader who in this age, has understood the essence and ethics of disagreement, was Imam Hassan al-Banna. He brought up his followers to believe in - and adhere to - them.

Despite his unflinching commitment to the cause of Muslim solidarity and his sincere efforts to unite the various Muslim groups and make them agree at least on minimum Islamic concepts and principles, as is clear from his own work *Al-Usool al-Ishroon*, he was convinced of the inevitability of disagreement. This he has eloquently discussed in many of his messages which have proved to be useful. In his message entitled "Our Da'wah", al-Banna spoke of the characteristics of his da'wah as being general ones which neither patronise a particular sect nor advocate a particular line of thought. Interest is in the core of deen and its essence; it hopes that all endeavours are united so that a more fruitful work can be done to produce greater results; it supports truth everywhere; it likes consensus and dislikes eccentricity; it attributes all mishaps which have befallen Muslims, to misguided disagreement and to disunity; it believes that love is the major factor of victories, and that the only hope of vigorating and revitalizing the present day "Ummah lies in avoiding the practices which led to failure, and reviewing and adopting the practice of the early generations of Muslims".

He cites an occasion when Hassan al-Banna was invited to give a lecture in a certain Egyptian village where the people were divided to the point of violence into two groups over whether Tarawih prayers should be twenty or eight Rak'ahs - each basing their stand on accepted traditions.

"The way he handled this event is instructive to all of us. He first asked: "What kind of religious performance is Salat al-Tarawih?" The answer was: "A Sunnah, those who perform it are rewarded, those who do not do if are not punished." He then asked: "And what is the judgement on Muslim brotherhood?" The people replied: "Obligatory, and it is one of the fundamentals of 'imam'. He then concluded: "Is it therefore, logical and permissible according to al-Shari'ah to abandon a Fard for a Sunnah?" He then told them that if they preserved their brotherhood and unity, and each went home and performed Salat al-Tarawih according to his own genuine conviction, it would indeed be far better than arguing and quarrelling".

VALUES

The Qur'an and Hadith have made it clear that not all acts have the same value. Not all good acts are equally good, and not all bad acts are equally bad. Moreover the circumstances under which they are done could affect their praiseworthiness or blameworthiness.

It is wrong to pursue people's minor sins while ignoring the major ones which compromise the essential character of Islam as a pure monotheistic religion. Such practices as witchcraft, and fortune-telling which are still rampant in our society, often in Islamic disguise, are far more worthy of struggling against than differences in matters of personal choice or ordinary human weaknesses.

As we have pointed out, people are all different in respect of their knowledge, endurance and iman, and we have no right to dismiss the weak as if they were outside the fold of Islam.

The Qur'an specifically mentions this:

"Then we have given the book for inheritance to such of our servants as we have chosen: but there are among them some who wrong their own souls; some who follow a middle course; and some who are, by Allah's leave, foremost in good deeds. That is the highest grace". (Qur'an 35:32).

Dr. al-Qaradawi points out:

"All these types of people - including the person who wrongs himself - are included in the fold of Islam. Consequently, enthusiastic young Muslims should not hasten to accuse other Muslims of *fiṣq* (wrong-going), to show animosity and antipathy towards them simply because they have committed some minor sins, or some acts on which judgement is obscure and on which there is contradicting evidence ... "

Moreover, Allah says in the Qur'an (53:31-32,4:31) that He will forgive the small faults of those who avoid major sins, and may forgive even major sins of those who repent. It is therefore not fitting for human beings to pursue each others' weaknesses out of bigotry and zealotry. Caliph Umar (RA'A) spoke firmly against a group of people who urged his Islamic Government to pursue people for minor sins - how much less are selfrighteous individuals or cliques or committees empowered to do so!

In this context I wish to say something about Hijab.

The Qur'an has enjoined on all Muslim women over the age of puberty the wearing of modest dress. It should cover all parts of the body except the face and hands and should not be tight or transparent.

It serves as a visible symbol that the Muslim woman is not available to the public gaze, and is to be treated with respect. The wearing of hijab is therefore a protection to the woman and to men who are susceptible to the sight of women's attractions.

It is therefore important for women to know and understand about hijab (modest dress).

Nevertheless, in the present day context, there is a danger in adopting harsh and dismissive attitudes towards women or girls who are not in full hijab.

It is in my view quite wrong to use the first outward and visible sign of a Muslim woman, which is hijab, as a clear indicator of whether she is a good or a bad Muslim. Some people seem to take the view that for women's dress, the blacker the better - if she is in black from head to toe she must be highly dedicated. If she wears socks too she must be even more dedicated. On the other hand if she wears European clothes she must be bad Muslim, if indeed she is a Muslim at all! This is a very simplistic analysis. It does not take into account the family background from which she has come. It may be that nobody in her household ever wore hijab.

It does not take into account the schools where she spent a minimum of 13 years before going for higher education - in which schools European dress and P.E. shorts and T-shirts were worn year after year in the presence of male teachers, male students and the general public. It does not take into account the strong influence of the media, the advertising business, the youth culture, which might have dominated her thinking throughout adolescence. It does not take into consideration that in some parts of the world - and not only non-Muslim parts - a woman in hijab would find it difficult or impossible to get a job or even a place in a higher institution. All these factors and several others affect a Muslim girl's attitude to dress.

Are we to look on all such women and girls as "failures", who are not proper Muslims? We should not judge sternly by outer appearances but welcome all Muslim women to Islamic gatherings without conditions of dress, and without constant nagging them about it. It is our duty to ensure that every Muslim woman is aware of the requirements of Islamic dress, the reasons for it and their importance. We should also encourage her to comply, using the Islamic principles of hikmah (i.e. wisdom). It also helps if we can make available styles of dress that the ordinary woman finds acceptable which comply with Islamic principles. Ultimately she must make her own decision. We have to understand that every human being is on a journey and passes through different stages of spiritual and intellectual development. If we want such women to come close to keen Muslims and learn about Islam we have to understand them as they are now. If we reject them or show signs of looking down on them, they are likely to exercise their faculty of choice and avoid us in future. That would be a loss to themselves and a loss to the Ummah. We have to encourage those in full hijab and those in semi hijab and those not in hijab. Allah stated in the verse quoted earlier that the "servants He has chosen" include not just "the foremost in deeds" but also those who "follow a middle course" and "those who wrong their own souls". We are not set up as judges of other peoples' weaknesses.

I sometimes hear people say: "There are no half-measures in Islam" which seems to mean: "You must be a perfect Muslim or you are nowhere". That is not possible, because even the best of Muslims only attained that status through a series of gradual stages of religious development.

Some people may ask: "Why should we not make a fuss about hijab? Is it not made compulsory in the Qur'an?"

Yes, it is, but so are a number of other things about which people are negligent. Even in the matter of dress, it is prescribed in the Hadith for Muslim men to cover themselves in public from the navel to the knee. Yet in some Muslim countries, Muslim boys and young men come out for sports in short shorts that do not reach even half way down the thigh. No one says they are going around naked. No one says such young men are disobeying Allah and His Messenger and should not attend Islamic activities.

In another example, the Qur'an has outlawed the giving and taking of interest (riba) in the strongest terms. It warns that those who do not stop it should "take notice of war from Allah and His Prophet" (Qur'an 2:279). The Hadith backs this up with a curse on those who take interest, those who give it and those who write and witness transactions involving riba.

Yet countless Muslims receive and pay interest on their banks accounts, and thousands work in banks. Our efforts to provide alternative ways of interest-free banking have been very feeble. Nobody suggests that those who give, take and witness interest on their bank accounts are not proper Muslims who are openly disobeying Allah. Nobody makes them feel unworthy to attend Islamic gatherings.

I am not saying that one wrong-doing justifies another wrong-doing. I am only pointing out that just as the young men are not conscious of offending against the Islamic code of dress by wearing shorts, and most bank-users are not conscious of offending against the Qur'anic prohibition of riba, so the Muslim girls unconsciously got used to inadequate dressing during their time in school. There is no reason to be severe with them yet lenient with the others. The ultimate solution lies in insistence on proper dress for Muslim school girls and boys, and availability of interest-free banks. These are responsibilities that lie on all of us.

ALLAH'S SUNNAH

Young people are generally in a hurry, and "haste" is a characteristic of mankind in general as mentioned in the Qur'an. Youth wants to sow today and harvest the next day - whereas it is a part of Allah's Sunnah that all things have their time to mature, bear fruit and ripen.

Some young Muslims declare that they are ready to sacrifice their lives for the cause of Islam, and maybe they are. But in most cases it is not their lives that are required, but patient endeavour. Unfortunately very few are ready for thy steady self-discipline of serious studies in order to attain excellence and uncover new truths in their fields of study. Many forget that "the pen is mightier than the sword" in its long-term effects. Mere sacrifice of lives cannot realise goals in the absence of well-planned, well thought strategies. Thus they seek an instant "victory or martyrdom" and refuse to undertake the pursuit of knowledge which requires unflinching perseverance over not only years but decades. They want "an Islamic State" at once - but even if they had the means to impose it, where are the Muslims equipped with the knowledge and the intellectual and moral qualities to administer an Islamic State?

Rather we have to truly cultivate ourselves as a broad Muslim community, to develop our natural potential and harness it so that our Ummah thinks and acts in an Islamic way. This requires a lot of patient work.

Some people object to this, thinking that patience would go on forever without achievement of the goal. AI-Qaradawi responds: "But do you not in the meantime instruct an ignorant person, guide someone to the right path, or lead another to repent? We may not live to see our achievement, but we must sow love and pray to Allah (SWT) for a great harvest".

The Qur'an says: "And say: Work (righteousness): Soon will Allah observe your work, and His Apostle, and the believers. Soon will you be brought back to the Knower of what is hidden and what is open. Then will He show you the truth of all that you did" (Qur'an 9:105).

RECOGNITION OF EXPERTISE AND SCHOLARSHIP

Muslim youth should respect expertise in the field of Islamic Studies as they respect it in other disciplines. A person does not become an expert in science by taking it for "A" level and reading a few books and magazines about it. It is not advisable to accept fatawa from people who have inadequate qualifications to deliver them. In spite of the depth of knowledge of the Righteous Caliphs, they used to consult and be consulted by their learned companions when confronted with new and critical issues. Umar (RA' A) used often when asked for a fatwa to reply what he did not know.

Imam Malik used to say: "If a person is asked on a certain issue, he should think of Jannah and Jahannam and of his own salvation in the Hereafter before he replies". This reflects the Hadith where the Prophet (pbuh) said that a person who guides other people to do wrong will share in their punishment if they do it.

We should give our respect to those scholars who show humility, and recognize the need for proper training and study before anyone

is qualified to exercise ijihad. Skill in rhetoric should not be confused with knowledge of fiqh and the person who excels in one may not excel in the other .

Dr. al-Qaradawi notes that a characteristic of a truly learned person is balance. "AI-Hasan al-Basri warned us that religion will be lost as a result of the practice of both the extremist and the negligent. The former tend to prohibit almost everything while the latter make every thing lawful and permissible. We therefore need those balanced people who have the mind of faqih, and the heart of a pious person; those who can reconcile duties with reality; who distinguish clearly between what is to be expected from the masses and what is to be expected of the learned ... "

CONDUCT OF DA'WAH

In their conduct of da'wah young Muslims should observe the way of da'wah prescribed in the Qur'an in 16:125; 29:46 and 2:68-9 - in a gracious manner, without wrangling, and with emphasis on points of common belief before discussion of areas of difference.

Likewise in conducting da'wah among Muslims the Prophet (pbuh) was told in the Qur'an:

"It is part of the mercy of Allah that you deal gently with them. If you were severe or hardhearted, they would have broken away from you ... " (Qur'an 3:159).

There is a warning in this to those who like to go to extremes and try to enforce these extremes on others. Some of these fiery ones are just fiery and quarrelsome by nature. If they had adopted Christianity they would have been fiery Christians; if they had adopted atheism they would have been fiery atheists. Every religion or ideology has its extremists. One should therefore not be brow-beaten and bullied by such harsh preachers. They are the ones with the problem of their anger, their sternness and their wish to reprove others for their sins. And these characteristics often mar not only their preaching but also their manners

in general - their relationship with other people, the politeness they should show to their elders and the respect they should give to people with greater knowledge, which may be concealed by natural humility.

They have forgotten the Hadith that cheerfulness towards other people, even a smile, is a sadaqah to be rewarded by Allah. They have forgotten the Hadith from Aisha that "Allah is kind and loves kindness; and confers on kindness what he does not confer upon severity and does not confer upon anything else beside it". Aisha did not forget such Hadith, and several times she mentioned occasions when the Prophet (pbuh) corrected her for an excess of youthful severity or impatience.

IDEALISM, DAYDREAMS AND THE IMMEDIATE TASK

Dr al-Qaradawi urges that rather than indulge in idealistic daydreams of a perfect world, it would be better for us to come down to earth and identify with the problems of people here and now - the poor and downtrodden masses of the cities and villages who lack a decent education and even the basics of life and health. "Here is material for youthful idealism and social change, and the opportunity for struggle to help people in need - the orphaned, the distressed, the weary and those without hope. This requires collective effort to eradicate illiteracy, disease, unemployment, lack of initiative and harmful habits". These are individual and collective duties which are a suitable form of 'ibadah' for those who wish to see the Muslim Ummah drag itself out of the mud of its decline.

In Dr. al-Qaradawi's view it is the experience of serving one's own community that will "mould, prepare and test the abilities of future generations for the leadership of the Ummah. It is wrong for any Muslim who has the ability to help his society to refuse to do so on the ground that he is waiting for a future Islamic State to set things right". Thus there must be long term preparation

leading to ultimate objectives, but also a lot of hard work to meet immediate needs and alleviate immediate ills.

BELIEF IN HUMAN GOODNESS

Dr. al-Qaradawi ends his book with advice to young Muslims to "liberate themselves from pessimism, and assume innocence and goodness in fellow-Muslims. We need a sympathetic understanding of people's weaknesses and faults, because they are a part of human nature. We must acknowledge that no one but Allah knows a person's innermost thoughts and motives. We must judge people by what they profess, not by what we suspect - the Qur'an, as mentioned earlier, tells us that "some suspicion is a sin".

We must recognize that every believer in Allah and His messenger cannot be devoid of some inborn good, however evil his practice may be. The Prophet (pbuh) used to treat wrong-doers as a physician would treat a patient, not as a policeman would treat a criminal.

In these ways the bond of Muslim brotherhood and sisterhood is not severed but strengthened. We need as ever to study and follow the exemplary pattern that the Prophet (pbuh) set up for us.

"These extremists who indiscriminately accuse whoever makes a mistake of kufr or shirk must understand that they have to change their strategy and learn that a great deal of the corruption and perversion that they abhor results mainly from ignorance or bad company. A wise man once said: 'Rather than cursing darkness, try to light a candle for the road'.

DA'WAH

The first is the broad question of Da'wah and the effects of extremism on da'wah. Does extremism benefit the cause of da'wah or harm it? I think there is no doubt that it harms it for a number of reasons.

Firstly extremism is by its definition a position taken by a minority - those that are far from the centre or middle of the road. Therefore an extremist version of Islam will not attract the majority of non-Muslims, who would simply find it too difficult to follow. Nor is it likely to appeal to the majority of Muslims, for the same reason.

Secondly, extremism hinders da'wah by causing unnecessary conflicts which give concern to people in authority. These people are naturally concerned about stability, and therefore impose restrictions to prevent recurrence. These restrictions limit the freedom of serious da'wah organizations to carry out their programmes. To give a simple example, a few years ago a group of extremists began visiting a certain girls' boarding school taking advantage of the freedom of the Muslim Students' Society and other organizations to conduct religious lectures at weekends. After a while it was learned that there was trouble. These enthusiasts had convinced some of the Muslim girls that they should refuse to attend classes in "kufr" knowledge and should abandon their education so as to go and get married. The school authorities, the parents, the Ministry of Education, religious leaders and even the (former) State Governor became involved in sorting the matter out. The outcome was that the Ministry of Education directed that no outside preachers or religious lecturers should be allowed into any of the schools in the State. Therefore not only Muslim Students Society but other reputable Islamic Organizations were obliged to suspend all their programmes designed to enlighten the secondary school students about Islam. This is one example among many of how extremists could abuse the freedom that exists. As a result of which that freedom could be denied to all.

In the same way, in the past anyone was free to preach anywhere in the country. But when some Muslims used that freedom to abuse other Muslims and provoke conflict, various State Governments enacted laws and introduced preaching permits, so that a Muslim could not conduct da'wah among Muslims except in a Mosque without having to go through an elaborate process of screening to get a permit.

Therefore extremism often constitutes a great obstacle to serious da'wah in many parts of the world.

Islam in itself is quite clearly the front runner as a religion acceptable to the majority of mankind.

Its teachings about the unity of God, the brotherhood of mankind and the accountability of human beings for their actions are clear, reasonable, good and true. Its scripture, the Qur'an is well-authenticated and not subject to doubt. Its acts of worship - the prayer, the fast, the zakat and the hajj - help to purify and discipline a person, and its moral teachings foster love, sharing and co-operation between people of all races. This is the religion that many ordinary people all over the world are quietly searching for, which strikes the balance between this life and the Hereafter.

But if some Muslims through their own excesses and public statements fail to demonstrate the beauty of Islam, and portray Islam as a religion of difficulty, internal dispute, harshness or aggression, these very non-Muslims will either run away or oppose us, because they find us oppressive and unreasonable, and we frighten them.

The second point I wish to touch on is that the Qur'an consistently addressed the Jews & Christians as "Ahl al-Kitab" (People of the Book) - people to whom revelation has come and who know something about Allah and His unity, even if they have some other doctrines that have distorted the straight path.

The Alh-al- Kitab were always distinct and enjoyed a protected status within the Islamic State. The continued survival of Jewish and Christian communities in Arab and Muslim lands until the present time is a witness to the tolerance extended to them by Muslims.

The Qur'an mentions the erroneous beliefs of some Christians about the Trinity, and about prophet Isa as God, or as Son of God, and describes these beliefs as "a denial of the truth" (Qur'an 5:73).

Yet it still refers to them as Ahl-al-Kitab, and still mentions that among them are some who are closest in affection to the Muslims (Qur'an 5:82).

Muhammad Asad comments on this verse:

"Although, by their deification of Jesus, they are guilty of the sin of Shirk ("The ascribing of divinity to anyone or anything beside God"), the Christians do not consciously worship a plurality of deities in-as-much as, theoretically, their theology postulates belief in the One God, who is conceived as manifesting himself in a trinity of aspects, or "persons", of whom Jesus is supposed to be one. However repugnant this doctrine may be to the teachings of the Qur'an, their shirk is not based on conscious intent, but rather flows from their "overstepping the bounds of truth" in their veneration of Jesus, referred to in Qur'an 4: 171 and 5:77."

Muslims must of course protect themselves and their faith against aggression and subversion from any quarter, but they should not go beyond what the Qur'an permits. Why give offence and achieve nothing? It is in conditions of peace that Islam spreads most rapidly, as could be seen after the Treaty of Hudaibiya. The Peace allowed the Muslims to move freely among the non-Muslims and to carry the message of Islam to them.

As a result, within a few years time there was no need to fight for Makkah because the Muslims had already become more numerous than the pagans.

From what is recorded of the deeds of the Prophet (pbuh) it is clear that he regarded all non-Muslims as potential Muslims, and exercised a lot of patience in calling them to Islam, whether they were Jews, Christians or pagans. Many Christians are ready to embrace Islam if we are ready to call them and teach them in the manner we are told to do it in the Qur'an - with hikmah (wisdom and tact) and beautiful preaching, and by cogent reasoning.

I am convinced that the truth cannot be suppressed for long. Some Christians leaders may try to cause their followers to hate Muslims and Islam. There are recent examples of their deliberately spreading misinformation about Islam in booklets and by word of mouth so that their followers would close their minds to it and refuse to listen when Muslims try to inform them. There are cases I have witnessed of educated Christians refusing to touch a piece of paper containing some facts about Islam, or literally putting their fingers in their ears rather than hear anything about it.

However, not all the followers are like sheep, and many are ready to use their independent judgement if they can see for themselves that the truth is otherwise than what they were told. I have met many converts to Islam who said that the main reason for their conversion was that they liked the way Muslims behaved, or that they experienced some acts of kindness and sincerity from a Muslim or that a Muslim got into conversation with them and explained Islam in a way they could understand.

So our manner of approach to all non-Muslims (as well as to Muslims) is very important. Each person is different. Until you have engaged an individual in conversation you do not know what he believes and why he believes it, and whether he is satisfied with his present beliefs. And if you start with a hostile or scornful attitude you will get nowhere. You will only succeed in confirming what he might have been told about Muslims being aggressive. Our task is to remove the prejudices, not to confirm them. Whoever confirms those prejudices and drives non-Muslims away is doing a disservice to Islam, to the Muslim Ummah and to mankind who are waiting for true guidance while some of those who have it are reoccupied with quarrelling among themselves and failing to convey the message to those who have not heard it.

History has lessons for us. Muslims in some parts of the world in the past failed to call pagans to Islam - they would despise and exploit them, and thus arouse their hatred. In course of time Christian missionaries came to teach and convert them, and to re-inforce their dislike of Muslims. This is the situation in which we now find ourselves and by this time we should have learned our lesson. If we do not take the trouble to know Islam and share it with others in the manner prescribed in the Qur'an we shall be the losers.

One last thing needs to be said about a common misunderstanding of the meaning of a well known Hadith. The Hadith says:

"If you see evil doing you should change it with your hand; and if that is not possible, change it with your tongue, and if that is not possible, hate it in your heart: and that is the weakest of faith."

(Hadith from An-Nawawi),

Some people have misunderstood this Hadith as a challenge to their manly courage. They understand it to mean that those of strong faith and courage should boldly use force to correct evil doing, those who have less faith and courage should at least speak against evil while those of the least faith and courage should at least hate the evil. Therefore they conclude that the use of force is superior to speaking against evil doing, and is ideally the first course of action.

This cannot however be what the Hadith means. We are aware that the Prophet preached among evil doers in Makkah for 13 years and to the best of our knowledge never once attempted to use force to correct them. Some of his followers were tortured and killed, his response was to send others to a place of safety in Abyssinia. But we could never say that these responses indicated lack of faith or courage. They were signs of his realistic understanding that to fight back at that time would be suicidal to his cause. He was not in a position to stop the oppression with his hand. To have done so would have only brought disaster on himself and the defenceless Muslims. Therefore he continued preaching and speaking courageously against the evil-doing of the idol-worshippers and had faith that the situation would change in God's good time. Events proved him right.

Muslims are not to act without common sense and prudence. This advice is contained in the Hadith: "Trust in God but tie your camel".

A good general knows that he may have to concede some territory or even lose a battle in order to win a war. We should not allow local and transient events to divert us from long-term objectives.

Even in Madinah where the Prophet (pbuh) possessed political leadership, he always preferred persuasion to force. There are a number of ahadith where wrong-doers were brought to the Prophet. Umar or some other Companions would request the Prophet to authorise putting them to death or inflicting some major punishment. He would refuse, and instead draw the person close and speak to him quietly of the moral and spiritual issues involved in his conduct, in such a way that he would understand and reform himself.

If we look at the Hadith with these examples of the Prophet in mind, it can be seen to offer another meaning:

"If you see evil-doing and are in a position to correct it (that is, you have the authority or ability to stop it) then you should exercise that Authority, even to the extent of using force if necessary.

"If you do not possess the authority to stop the evil-doing, but are in a position to warn against it, or call on the authorities concerned to stop it, or mobilise public opinion against it, you have a moral duty to do so.

"If you are in a position where you cannot even report to the authorities or even raise your voice without being crushed, and have no means of migration from the evil situation, you still have the obligation to continue to hate the evil doing in your heart."

In other words, whatever your level of authority or ability to correct evil doing; you have a moral duty to exercise it as far as you are capable, and should not neglect it. because it is part of commanding what is the characteristic of a Muslim community.

To put the situation in a familiar context, it may be that your college students' union is planning a contest to choose a beauty queen. Committed Muslim students are naturally strongly opposed to it, but are out-voted. The contest is to go ahead. What should they do?

Perhaps they appeal to the college authorities to step in and forbid it (using their tongues to correct evil-doing). The authorities reply that it is a students' affair and they cannot interfere, or that it is a multi-religious institution, and so on.

So what next? Is it to use their hands to destroy the musical instruments and fuse all the lights on the night of the contest? It could be done, and has been done. But what is the likely outcome? For unlawful destruction of university property the students could be dismissed or even imprisoned. Then they have become the enemies of those, who wanted to enjoy the beauty contest. Next time there is an MSS function some of them may come and fuse the lights or destroy the loud speaker in revenge. Meanwhile the beauty contest is rescheduled and takes place the following week with stricter security precautions against sabotage. Did those who tried to change things with their hands without authority gain or lose, on balance?

What else could they have done? Firstly, have they been carrying on effective da'wah among the Muslim students all along, so that if they happen to be a majority they could outvote others in the Students' Union? Secondly, if they could not raise a majority against it, has their da'wah among the Muslim sisters been widespread and effective enough to ensure that no Muslim girl takes part in the competition? Thirdly what of using prayer time at the college mosques to counsel Muslim students against attendance? Fourthly what of using the campus newspaper to explain why they think beauty contests are degrading? Fifthly, what of organising an alternative interesting activity at another venue to coincide with the beauty contest? Sixthly, that of paying attention to their studies so that in 10 - 20 years' time they could become the lecturers, the professors and ultimately the university authorities themselves, where they would wield a great deal of legitimate influence over not only students' entertainments but over the whole running of the institution with all the scope for healthy change?

I suggest we reflect for a moment on the career of Mr. Gorbachev of the Soviet Union. He rose steadily through the Communist ranks under a succession of diehard Communist Presidents. He became the head of the KGB - the Soviet Security apparatus. Yet when it came to his turn to occupy the Top Post, he astonished people by dismantling the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe and introducing reforms that spelled the end of communism. If he had dared to express his views 10 or 20 years earlier, he would have been finished before coming anywhere near to power.

I am not suggesting that a Muslim student should conceal his Islamic identity but that he should not try to exert authority over others which he does not rightly possess, or take illegal action which could result in the end of his studies and frustration of his long-term aims of reform.

6. Those who are serious about Islamization and da'wah must be clear about their methods, which must accord with Islamic teachings. There are all sorts of ways of bringing about change that are far more successful than force or threats of force. But they need clear thinking, balanced judgement, love of truth, hard work, initiative, patience and confidence in Allah's support.

I have tried in this paper to touch on a number of aspects of extremism - its causes and effects and some of the problems associated with it in its various manifestations.

By study of the Islamic sources we can see that moderation and balance are at the heart of the religion. They are not to be equated with half-hearted commitment to Islam, but are the true and authentic expression of Islam in accordance with the Qur'an and the life example of the Prophet (pbuh). These are manifested in kindness and good manners, and a reasoned approach to da'wah.

I hope that what I have said, or quoted from the Qur'an and Hadith or from the comments of Dr. al-Qaradawi, will be of use to you and a source of guidance in your approach to life now and in the future. If I have made any mistakes in the course of this presentation I pray Allah to forgive me and hope for correction from those with more knowledge.