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.

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, 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 one greater than one can bear".

The word "moderate" is sometimes taken to mean "only halfcommitted". This is a mistake. A moderate may be just as committed as an extremist, but he fulfils his commitment in a different way. 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.. 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.

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.

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.

"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 (pbuh) 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) overburdened themselves and perished." (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.

Islam purifies 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;

"0 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:

"0 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: "0 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

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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.

"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. 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: "0 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 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. 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

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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.

Another aspect of the shallowness of knowledge is the inability to distinguish between major and minor degrees of kurf, 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'. Thev 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 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. Another cause of extremism is its opposite - laxity indifference to Islamic values and corruption in the society - when those people fail to take the obvious and necessary steps to control it for the general good for the society.

THE REMEDIES FOR EXTREMISM

Having identified some of the symptoms and diagnosed some of the causes of extremism, what are 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 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.

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 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 "people" 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 mixture 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 verdict (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.

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'.

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).

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. "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 verdicts 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 (may Allah be pleased with him) used often when asked for a verdict 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 independent

thinking (ijtihad). Skill in rhetoric should not be confused with knowledge of fiqh and the person who excels in one may not excel in the other.

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 everything 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 charity 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

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 'worship' for those who wish to see the Muslim Ummah drag itself out of the mud of its decline.

BELIEF IN HUMAN GOODNESS

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 messengers cannot be devoid of some in-born 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.

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 laws and preaching permits were enacted, so that a Muslim could not conduct da'wah among Muslims without having to go through a 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 Oneness 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 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, 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 (pbuh) 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 Hudaybiya. 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.

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 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 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.

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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.
"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, 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.

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.

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.