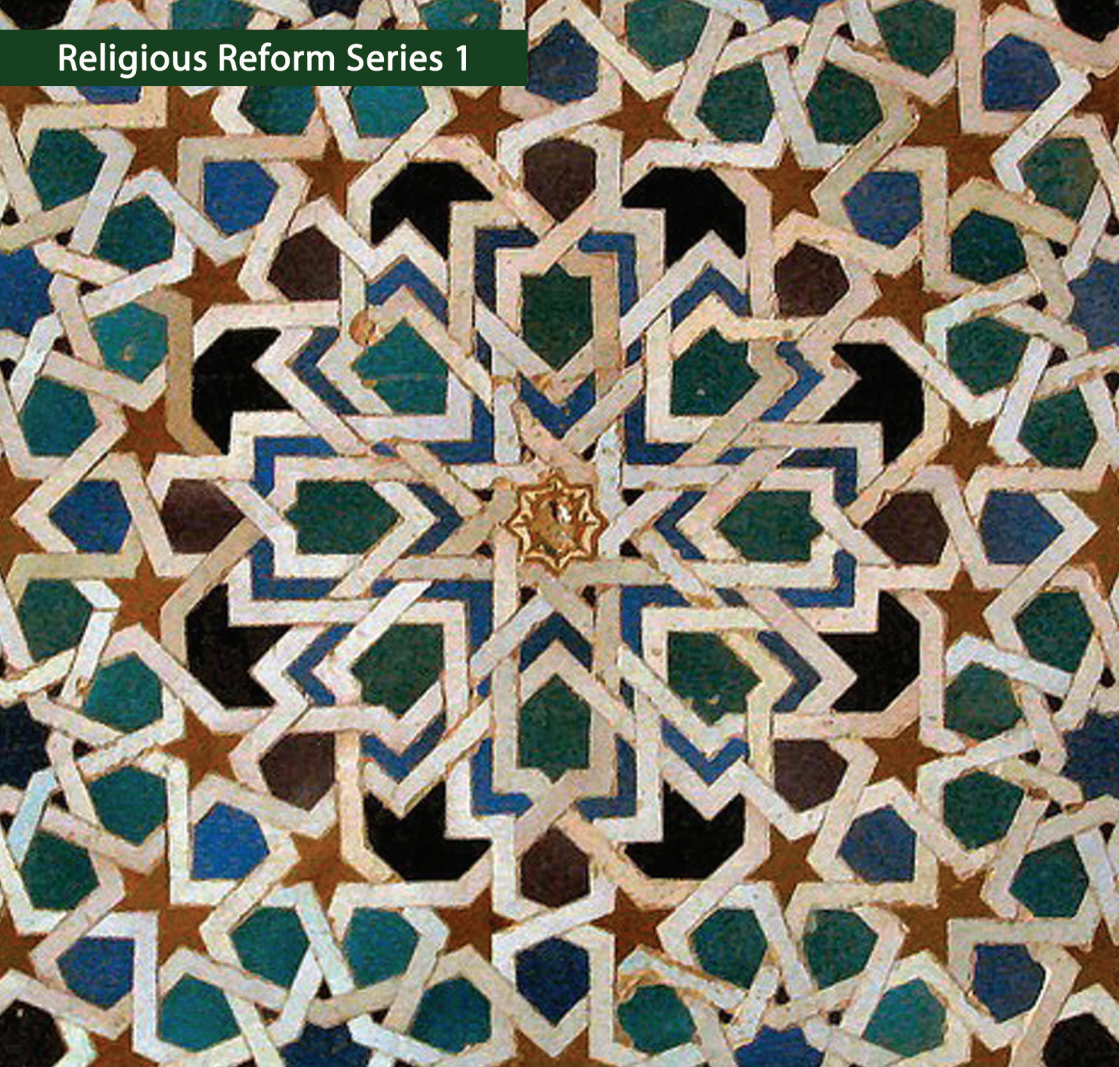


Religious Reform Series 1



# The Balance of Islam in Challenging Extremism

Dr. Usama Hasan

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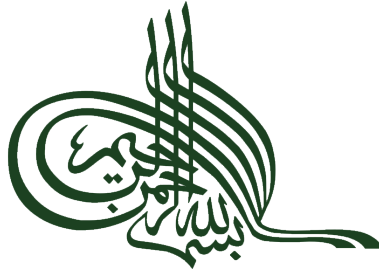
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# **The Balance of Islam in Challenging Extremism**

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## Acknowledgment

This article is an expanded version of the Keynote Paper, *The Threat from Extremism to Islam and the World*, delivered by the author at *The Message of Peace in Islam conference*, Damascus, 2009.

## Balance vs. Extremes: a Qur'anic Perspective

Islam, as revealed in the Qur'an and manifested by Muhammad, Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, is far more wide, deep and generous than is often currently found in the popular imagination and conception of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The Islam of the Qur'an and Sunnah is the Straight Path to God<sup>1</sup>; an outward path of personal devotion and social justice that reflects the inward state of the universe: created in the image of God, and hence reflecting the Divine names of Truth and Justice in the principle of cosmic harmony and balance.

We are told in the Qur'an:

*Do they then seek other than the Religion of God? – when to Him have submitted all creatures in the heavens and the earth, willingly and unwillingly, and to Him they shall be returned.*<sup>2</sup>

Further, we are told:

*And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance: in order that you may not transgress the Balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the Balance.*<sup>3</sup>

Remaining in harmony with Nature and with our original selves is so important that one of the Qur'anic names for Islam is *Fitrah*<sup>4</sup> – the original or primordial state of humanity, blessed with knowledge of the Divine Names and with the Spirit of God breathed into us.

Thus, any expression of true religion in the world must be one of justice,

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1 Qur'an, *al-Hijr* (The Rocky Tract), 15:41

2 Qur'an, *Al 'Imran* (The Family of Imran), 3:83

3 Qur'an, *al-Rahman* (The Most Merciful), 55:7-9

4 Qur'an, *al-Rum* (The Roman Empire), 30:30

harmony and balance. Any imbalance or injustice leads to extremism and vice-versa: hence, the Qur'an warns the People of Scripture (*Ahl al-Kitab*) not to go to extremes in religion:

*O People of Scripture! Do not go to extremes in your religion.*<sup>5</sup>

Fittingly, this warning is given twice, perhaps indicating the reality that there are always two extremes either side of every Golden Mean. For example, one of these verses warning against extremism goes on to affirm Jesus as Christ, Messenger and Word of God, neither an impostor nor God Himself.

The Qur'anic advice for living in the world is overwhelmingly one of keeping the balance, whilst always being devoted to God. So, we are encouraged, for example, to be neither miserly nor extravagant when spending, and to practice moderation in speech, including voice-levels in prayer, and even in our manner of walking:

*Do not place your hand tied to your neck (in miserliness), nor open it totally (as a spendthrift).*<sup>6</sup>

*(The Servants of God are) those who, when they spend, they are neither extravagant nor miserly, but follow a balance in between.*<sup>7</sup>

*Do not be (too) loud in prayer, nor (too) quiet: seek a way between those (limits).*<sup>8</sup>

*Be moderate in your walking.*<sup>9</sup>

Islam comprises a balanced approach to doctrine and beliefs also: the

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5 Qur'an, *al-Nisa'* (Women), 4:171 & *al-Ma'idah* (The Tablespread), 5:80

6 Qur'an, *al-Isra'* (The Night Journey), 17:29

7 Qur'an, *al-Furqan* (The Criterion), 25:67

8 Qur'an, *al-Isra'* (The Night Journey), 17:110

9 Qur'an, *Luqman*, 31:19

example of Jesus Christ has already been cited. Further examples would include the belief in the Divine Decree, that should preclude despair at misfortune and arrogant celebration upon good fortune, as though one had earned such good fortune purely by oneself, without the Divine Grace.<sup>10</sup>

Later Islamic texts on beliefs and creed such as that of Imam Tahawi would usually mention that the Islamic creed about the Decree avoided the extremes of both atheistic free-will and choice-denying determinism. Further, they would usually state that the Islamic teachings about God avoid the extremes of the anthropomorphists who conceived of God as having a physical body, and of those who denied the Divine Names revealed in the Qur'an.<sup>11</sup>

More generally, the path of Islam can be seen as a balance of the inward and outward. It is especially a harmony of Law and Spirit, between the extremes of spirit-less law and lawless spirit.

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10 Qur'an, *al-Hadid* (Iron), 57:22-23

11 See Hamza Yusuf, *The Creed of Imam al-Tahawi*, Zaytuna Institute, 2007, for a discussion of these debates.



## Balance vs. Extremes: The Way of the Prophet Muhammad

Not only did the Messenger of Allah (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) live a full life of balance and harmony with creation in the Divine Presence, he repeatedly warned against the dangers of extremism and taught practical steps that would guarantee a balanced spiritual life in this world and guard against destructive extremism. His Companions manifested this balance in their outlook and practice of Islam.

The following are some of the teachings of the Prophet that have been transmitted in this regard:

1. *Beware of extremism in religion, for it destroyed those before you.*<sup>12</sup>

The *Khawarij* or *Kharijis* (Rebels) have been the most destructive and violent extremists throughout the history of Islam. They began at one extreme of intense love for the fourth caliph, Ali. Love then turned to hate and they rebelled against his authority, eventually murdering him. The *Khawarij* indulged in *takfir* (excommunication) of other Muslims, and later splintered repeatedly into dozens of sub-sects, each one of which would excommunicate all other *Kharijis*, never mind other Muslims! The theoretical excommunication has almost always been accompanied by violent rebellion or persecution. The same pattern is observed today with all extremist cults and sects, whether within Islam or other religions.

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12 Ahmad (nos. 1851 & 3248), Nasa'i, Ibn Majah, Hakim & others - cf. *Sahih al-Jami' al-Saghir* of M.N. al-Albani, no. 2680 & *Silsilah al-Ahadith al-Sahihah* of M.N. al-Albani, no. 1283.



2. *On the authority of Abu Hurayrah, who said: The Messenger of Allah (May Allah bless him and grant him peace) said, "Truly, the religion is ease. Anyone who tries to outdo the religion in strictness, it will overcome him. So remain steadfast and be moderate, and seek help with journeys of the morning and evening and a part of the night."*<sup>13</sup>

The eminent subcontinental scholar of hadith, 'Abdul Ghaffar Hasan, explains this teaching by saying, "Just as a traveller does not travel continuously, but rather proceeds during mild and cool times, using the remainder of the time to rest himself and his mount, thus should be the traveller on the path of Islam. Taking upon oneself more difficulty than one can bear and emphasising voluntary actions in a way opposed to the Sunnah [Way of the Prophet] are all deeds that open the door to extremism in the religion. Anyone who gets caught up in extremism and excessiveness and then tries to wrestle with the religion does not harm the religion at all; rather, he has to retreat in the end."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Islam is again likened to a journey, a path to God. Travelling upon that journey has to be measured and balanced, like any terrestrial journey in our present, earthly life.

3. *Ruined are those who indulge in hair-splitting! Ruined are those who indulge in hair-splitting!*<sup>15</sup>

A famous incident from early Islamic history illustrates this teaching. Abdullah bin Umar was asked by a man about killing a mosquito. He asked, "From which people are you?" The man replied, "From the people of 'Iraq." He said, "Look at this one! He asks me about killing a mosquito, when they have killed (Husayn) the grandson of the Prophet (may Allah

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13 Bukhari (*Mishkat al-Masabih*, Book of Prayer, no. 1246)

14 Abd al-Ghaffar Hasan, *The Way of the Prophet*, trans./ed. Usama Hasan, Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2009, p. 45 (Hadith no. 26). This is a translation of Abd al-Ghaffar Hasan Umarpuri, *Intikhab-e-Hadith*, Islamic Publications Ltd., Lahore, 1995 (first published: 1956)

15 Bukhari

bless him and grant him peace)! I heard the Prophet (May Allah bless him and grant him peace) saying, 'These two (Hasan and Husayn) are my sweet-basils (i.e. perfumed flowers) in this world'.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. *A time for this and a time for that (sa'ah wa sa'ah).*<sup>17</sup>

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said this to his companion Hanzalah, who felt guilty and hypocritical because he experienced spiritual elevation in the mosque in the presence of the Prophet, but returned to his worldly ways with his family. The Prophet taught him that this was not hypocrisy, but simply the natural passage of time and spiritual states. This hadith is extremely important in keeping a balance in religion and avoiding extremism. The full incident is as follows:

*Abu Bakr was walking in Madinah when he came across Hanzalah shouting repeatedly in the street, "Hanzalah has become a hypocrite!" Abu Bakr asked him what was the matter. Hanzalah replied that he felt spiritually uplifted whilst with the Prophet, peace be upon him, but when he returned to his wife and children at home, he would become busy with mundane domestic matters and his spiritual state would be lowered. Abu Bakr replied, "I too experience the same phenomenon: let us go and ask the Prophet, peace be upon him, about this." When they did so, the Prophet advised, "If you remained in exalted spiritual states at all times, the angels would shake hands with you in the street and even in your beds; but, O Hanzalah, there is a time for this and a time for that."*

In other words: there is a time for serious work and worship, and a time for rest, relaxation and entertainment.

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16 Bukhari (*Mishkat al-Masabih*, Book of Virtues, no. 6136); cf. Hasan, p. 59, Hadith no. 56  
17 Bukhari & Muslim

*5. When you pray by yourself, lengthen your prayer as much as you wish. When you lead others in prayer, shorten your prayer as much as possible, for the elderly, the weak and those who have matters to attend to, they all follow you in prayer.*<sup>18</sup>

In illustration of this principle, the Prophet's prayer when he led the community was relatively short without compromising the essential humility and stillness of prayer. By himself, he would often stand in prayer for most or all of the night. Furthermore, he famously rebuked his companion Mu'adh for leading very long night prayers that were too much of a strain on his congregation, most of whom had been farming or shepherding their flocks of livestock all day.

An important extension of this Islamic teaching is that for someone serious about their religion and spirituality, they are entitled to impose a strict code upon themselves, but must be generous and merciful towards others. Loss of this principle leads to imposing one's own religious understanding upon others, another avenue to extremism.

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18 Bukhari & Muslim; cf. Hasan, p. 160, Hadith no. 259

## Extremism as a Response to Modernity

The preceding Qur'anic principles and Prophetic guidance are very helpful in dealing with one of the most common causes of extremism: a phobia of modernity and its technology, especially when these are used for entertainment that may seem opposed to a life of worship.

Thus, throughout Muslim history, some jurists have opposed technological innovations such as the printing press, photography, television and sports, declaring these to be prohibited (*haram*). Similarly, in previous centuries in Europe, bishops preached against the evils of dance halls and later cinemas that were becoming more popular than the churches.

Considering more recent history, the armed rebels in Saudi Arabia led by Juhayman al-Utaybi who rose up against the government there in 1979 and barricaded themselves inside the Grand Mosque of Mecca, were known to be opposed, amongst other things, to the rising popularity of television and football in their country.<sup>19</sup> During the 2006 and 2010 football World Cups, extremists in Somalia burst into a cinema and house that was screening a live match and shot dead a number of soccer fans. During the 2012 European Football Championships, militants attacked soccer fans in Kenya, killing three people, including a little boy.

Since 1997, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan have banned television, films and music and been known to take violent action against shops selling digital media products. The 2009 civil war in the Swat valley of Pakistan, plus the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, illustrates the threat posed by extremist interpretations, not only to Islam but to the whole world.

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19 For a good, readable account of this incident, see Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine*, Penguin, 2008. My own father was caught up in this siege as a peaceful pilgrim, escaping through a window between Mounts Safa and Marwa. As a child on a subsequent visit to Mecca, I remember seeing the bullet-holes inside the Sacred Mosque caused by the shootouts resulting from the rebellion.

## A Balance between Worship and Relaxation

Such extreme reactions against forms of entertainment are a loss of balance and cause psychological and spiritual crises – a feature of cults that defame and destroy true religion. Islam encourages entertainment in moderation – as one of the early authorities remarked, “The soul needs a rest just as the body does.”

Thus, the Prophet occasionally listened to poetry and even quoted it, although his status as Prophet was too exalted for him to be described as a poet, an ascription that the Qur’an categorically denies.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, whilst some of his Companions such as Abu Bakr rarely composed poetry, others such as Hassan bin Thabit and Abdullah bin Rawaha mastered it and were employed by the Prophet in psychological warfare to accompany the military responses to his enemies.<sup>21</sup> The Prophet famously observed that, “There is wisdom to be found in poetry,” but cautioned against filling one’s heart and mind with it, since that would detract from prayer and the remembrance of God.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, the Prophet would often smile, laugh modestly and joke with his companions. However, he cautioned against excessive laughter, for it “kills the heart,”<sup>23</sup> and leads to a frivolous approach to life and one’s responsibilities. He even occasionally listened to music and singing and recommended these in moderations for joyous occasions such as weddings and two Eid celebrations.<sup>24</sup> None of this detracted from his constant devotion to God, his sense of the sacred in all of creation and his sense of responsibility in serving God’s creatures.

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20 See e.g. Qur’an, *Ya Sin*, 36:69

21 Bukhari & Muslim

22 Bukhari & Muslim

23 Ibn Majah

24 Sheikh ‘Abdullah b. Yusuf al-Juday’, *al-Musiqiwa l-Ghina’ fi Mizan al-Islam* (“Music & Singing in the Balance of Islam”), Al Judai Research & Consultations, Leeds, UK, 1425/2004. For a strict, conservative view on the subject, see Abu Bakr Mustafa al-Kanadi, *The Islamic Ruling on Music and Singing*, Abul-Qasim Bookstore, Jeddah, 1986.

This example was followed by the Prophet's companions. For example, Abul-Darda' said, "I strengthen myself for a night of worship with an hour of entertainment." An eyewitness reported that "The Companions of the Messenger of Allah (May Allah bless him and grant him peace) were neither dry-natured nor morbid. They would chant poetry to each other in their gatherings, and mention some of the matters of their pre-Islamic Days of Ignorance (*Jahiliyyah*). However, if any of them was asked to do something against the command of Allah, the pupils of his eyes would revolve as though he were mad." Another one reported, "The Companions would playfully throw watermelon at each other, but when serious situations occurred, they were real men."<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, a lack of humour and insensitivity to cultural elegance is a characteristic of religious extremism that is dangerous to human psychology and spirituality.

A balanced approach to matters of culture and entertainment may be illustrated by an autobiographical anecdote from the Sufi master Ali al-Hujwiri: he recounts that during his youth, one of his shaykhs once asked him what he desired. Hujwiri replied that, at that moment, he desired to listen to music and singing. The shaykh called for some musicians who entertained the young man to his heart's content. The shaykh then said to Hujwiri that there would come a time in his spiritual development when such music would seem to him to be no more "than the crowing of a crow."<sup>26</sup>

Religious and spiritual teachers should pursue such an approach to matters, especially with young people: their spiritual development should be encouraged, which will automatically lead to more ascetic lives – a spirituality that lives in the world without being consumed by worldliness. However, forcing one's own religious and moral codes upon others when they are not prepared for these, is highly problematic.

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25 Bukhari, *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Chapter: Pride, Hadith no. 555; cf. Hasan, p. 160, Hadith no. 258. Also *ibid.*, Chapter: Joking, Hadith no. 266; cf. Hasan, p. 159, Hadith no. 256.

26 Ali al-Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub* (Unveiling the Veiled)

## Dealing with Extremism

The following wisdom in dealing with extremism may be derived from Islamic tradition, history and experience.

### 1. Dialogue before military action

The original “violent extremists,” i.e. the *Khawarij* rebels, have already been mentioned. It is worth noting that the fourth caliph of Islam, Ali bin Abi Talib, pursued military action against them only after exhausting all efforts at dialogue and reconciliation. In a famous political move, he sent Abdullah bin Abbas, a cousin of both Ali and the Prophet, known for his insightful understanding of the Qur’an and Islamic law, to debate with the rebels. His skilful presentation of arguments led to two-thirds of the six-thousand-strong rebel army defecting to the side of the mainstream Muslim community. According to some reports, Ali himself debated the rebels further and convinced the remaining ones to join him also, but they later rebelled against him again.

The debate between ‘Ali, represented by Ibn ‘Abbas, and the rebels was regarding three matters:

- (i) The rebels said that Ali had rejected his God-given duty of being caliph by subjecting himself to arbitration by human beings, and had hence gone against the Qur’anic teaching that “Command or Judgment belongs to Allah alone”<sup>27</sup>: denying a Qur’anic teaching constitutes unbelief. Ibn Abbas replied that God had himself commanded the use of two human arbiters to solve matrimonial disputes between a husband and wife<sup>28</sup>, and the welfare of the entire Muslim community was a far more serious matter than that.

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27 Qur’an, *Al-An’am* (Cattle) 6:57; *Yusuf* (Joseph) 12:40 & 12:67  
28 Qur’an, *Al-Nisa’* (Women) 4:35



- (ii) The rebels criticised Ali for writing to Mu'awiyah, who also claimed the caliphate, as "Ali" rather than as "Caliph Ali," hence again denying his God-given role and therefore being guilty of unbelief. Ibn Abbas replied that at the writing of the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah between the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the polytheists, the Prophet withdrew the term, "Muhammad, Messenger of Allah" even though this was the truth, in favour of "Muhammad son of Abdullah," since the polytheists accepted the latter term but not the former.
  
- (iii) The rebels criticised Ali for neither taking booty nor enslaving opponents, even though he had killed opposing warriors, during the "Battle of the Camel" against an army led by Aisha, the Prophet's wife. They said that this was against God-given rules of war, and therefore another count of unbelief. Ibn Abbas replied that the opponents included Aisha, known as the "Mother of the Believers" since the Prophet was a father figure to Muslims: if the rebels denied Aisha's status, they would be guilty of unbelief; if they accepted her status but still allowed her enslavement, that included the right of a master to have sexual intercourse with his female slaves in those times, they would again be guilty of unbelief for allowing sexual intercourse with one's mother.<sup>29</sup>

In one report, Ali described the rebels' quotation of the verse, "Command or Judgment belongs to Allah alone" as "A word of truth used for the purpose of falsehood." Note that the same idea, "Judgment is only for Allah," has been a favourite slogan of Islamist organisations since the 20th century to oppose free democracies and promote repressive theocracies in a very un-Islamic way.

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29 This detailed debate is reproduced from Tabari in Ibn Kathir's voluminous history of the world, *Al-Bidayah wa l-Nihayah*, Dar Abi Hayyan, Cairo, 1416/1996, 14 vols, vol. 7, pp. 335-7

Dialogue has remained the first choice of traditional Muslim responses to armed, rebellious extremism, with military action being a last resort. For example, in our times since the events of 9/11, dialogue with extremists and terrorists has been successfully pursued in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt, with a number of high-profile extremist preachers and terrorist leaders abandoning their dangerous paths and recanting in public, with a powerful effect upon many of their former followers.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, if dialogue does not take place or fails, the outcome is war, civil war or armed conflict, as with the “War on Terror” in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 9/11, including the conflicts in Waziristan, Swat and the *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) fiasco in Islamabad, 2007.

Part of the ideal process of dialogue is the use of reconciliatory language, even with extremist opponents. Caliph Ali followed this sublime practice with the rebels. He described their leader as no more than a “rejecter” of his caliphate. He was asked if they were polytheists, to which he answered, “They fled from polytheism (to monotheism).” He was then asked if they were hypocrites, to which he replied, “Hypocrites do not remember God much” – the rebels were given to lengthy devotions and prayer. He was further asked what they were in that case. He replied, “They were our brothers; they rebelled against us. We fought them due to their rebellion against us.”<sup>31</sup>

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30 Examples of such people are Muntasir al-Zayyat, the Egyptian Jihadist leader who instigated the abandonment of armed struggle by his group in Egypt, and Noman Benotman, Senior Analyst at Quilliam, who knew Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan in the 1990s and was head of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, a militant organisation, when he convinced its other leaders to disband and abandon their flawed path.

31 Ibn Kathir, vol. 7, pp. 346-7

## 2. Justice and respect for human rights

As stated earlier, extremism is opposed to justice and therefore leads to injustice. The converse is also true: injustice and oppression can lead to a reactionary extremism.

For example, it is generally accepted that the practice of torturing suspects accused of belonging to extremist groups in Egyptian prisons in the second half of the twentieth century only resulted in more extremism and a greater danger to Egyptian society, with *takfiri* terrorism continuing for decades.

Similarly, President Obama declared in May 2009 that the existence of Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay had become a recruiting cry for extremists such as al-Qaeda, and was thus counter-productive.

Another example is that the longer the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues in the Middle East, the greater the likelihood of extremism in the region. As long as Israelis and Arabs do not coexist justly and peacefully, religious and political extremism is likely to continue in the Middle East.

Thus, as part of any global struggle against extremism, Arab and Muslim-majority governments must end all cruel treatment and torture of prisoners, whose basic human rights must be respected. The US must likewise live up to President Obama's promise that his country "will not torture," whether in the US or in secret locations around the world. The UK government must likewise ensure that it does not support the outsourcing of torture to non-Western governments and that it is not complicit in practices such as "extraordinary rendition."

### **3. Respect for faith in public life**

The countries of the world, particularly Arab and Muslim-majority countries, face two extremes here, between those who wish to set up narrow-minded, theocratic “nanny states” and those who advocate a militant, anti-religious secularism that unjustly represses the public expression of faith. In multi-cultural and multi-religious societies, we need the rule of just laws that treat all citizens equally, whilst maintaining respect for shared human values and spirituality in the public space.

### **Conclusion**

The human condition is such that all aspects of it, including faith and religion, are liable to extremist distortions. However, cures and antidotes to such problems are also available, especially in the teaching and practice of Islam. Religious communities, governments and civil society groups need to draw on such resources and work together to defeat the scourge of extremism and restore a sense of balance to our private and public manifestations of faith in God.



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