REVIVING THE *WASATIYYAH* VALUES FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN PLURAL SOCIETIES

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Abstract

World religions play an important key role in sustaining interreligious harmony between the different creeds and cultures of humanity. Therefore, it is very imperative for every adherents of major religions to uphold and practice the essential values of their religious teachings consistently. As for Islam, it has rich tradition of guiding principles, called wasatiyyah that ensures the social justice and prosperity in a plural society. This article aims at reviving the pertinent values of wasatiyyah concept that has been practiced by the early generations of Muslim society. For this purpose, we have reviewed major works of Islamic literature and applied content analysis of these resources. Current example of Malay world is taken into portion as a model of wasatiyyah society. It is found that wasatiyyah values provide vital elements of balance, justice, excellent, strength, honour, and peace that would give significant impact in building inter-religious harmony among world community. Indeed, an empirical work of wasatiyyah application should be further pursued in order to fully justify its workable methods of instrumenting the positive values of wasatiyyah in the current context of plural societies.

Introduction

In today's global crisis, it is of utmost importance for the world community to recognize and understand the complexity of religious-cultural and racial differences that exist amongst them. Disputes and conflicts have always formed part of the fabric of human's interaction since ancient time. Human as individual, groups, or nations are always tend to have arguments and disagreement in many kind of issues. Such dispute if continuing unresolved would eventually lead to violent conflicts that resulting in bloodshed, wars and suffers. Many wars between nations, ethnic groups or religious communities had their origins in territorial, political, economic, personal or religious disputes. In this regard, Islam provides pertinent solution and approach for human being to deal with people, nature and his own-self properly. In this paper, we seek to discuss the Islamic conception of *wasatiyyah* (moderate and balance) that has vital values for shaping a balance, harmony and sustainable interreligious relationship among nations worldwide.

The concept of *wasatiyyah* is very important to be highlighted especially during the current state of crisis in Islamic world where many irresponsible acts such as terrorism, fundamentalism, extremism, liberalism and many more were easily associated to Islam just because of their so-called "Islamic" label and appearance. Even worse is the internal state of Muslim that occupied with long misunderstanding and battle of ideology that claiming as the most guided groups in Islam. Therefore, *wasatiyyah* holds a very important key role to address those misconceptions. *Wasatiyyah* is an excellent concept to be grasped because of its nature that save a person from the thought-provoking temptation, reach the intended messages by God, enhance the implementation of Shari'ah purposes (*Maqasid Shari'ah*) and to avoid from getting irresponsible accusation and slanders. In fact, this concept is originated from the Quran and Prophetic traditions that advocate humankind to approach justice and truth. In current context, can *wasatiyyah* be used as an instrument to uphold social justice and harmony among world society?

The Meaning of *Wasatiyyah*

Wasatiyyah is an Arabic term that refers to an individual or group characteristics and behaviour as being moderate and balanced.[1] It also means an attitude, which is contrary to the state of excessiveness and extremism.[2] There are a number of terminologies in English literature that associated with *wasatiyyah*, such as

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[1] Muhammad Asad, (2011), *The Message of the Qur'an*, London: Dar Andalus, 80.
[2] Yusuf al-Qaradawi, (n.d.), *Al-Khasais al-Aammah li al- Islam,* Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah.

moderation, mainstream, intermediary, middle path, midpoint, reasonable, rational, acceptable, common, and others. The term *wasatiyyah* is a verbal noun (*masdar*) derived from the word *wasat* in the following Qur'anic verse:

"The foolish of the people will say: What has turned them from the *qiblah* which they formerly observed? Say: Unto Allah belong the East and the West. He guides whom He will unto a straight path. Thus we have appointed you a moderate community (*ummatan wasatan*), that you may be witnesses against mankind and that the Messenger may be a witness against you. And we appointed the *qiblah* which you formerly observed only that we might know him who follows the Messenger, from whom who turn from his heels. In truth, it was a hard (test) save from those whom Allah guided. But it was not Allah's purpose that your faith should be in vain, for Allah is full of pity, merciful toward mankind".

(Al-Baqarah, 2:142-143)

The above mentioned verses highlight two specific criteria of human being, i.e., the witnesses (*Shuhada*) and the fools (*sufaha'*). The most essential quality of a reliable witness in Islam is being moderate, whose testimony can be accepted in the court of law. This is how the Qur'an describes the characteristic of true believers. The unbelievers, on the other hand, are indicated as the Fools (*sufaha*), which are quite the opposite. God made those who receive the guidance and live by it as the Moderate Community (*ummatan wasatan*). The word *ummah* is choosen to display four essential meanings that reflect to the origin, the point of reference, the group and the religion.[3] The word *wasatan* used to show the middle point between two opposing sides or in between of two extremes. When the Muslims are called "the Moderate Community", it is meant that they are "the best community" (*khair ummah*) who are "the most excellent in virtue" (*afdal*) and that their religion is the moderate religion.

According to al-Tabari, the word *safih* or *sufaha* literally means foolish, stupid, silly, incompetent, impudent, shameless and insolent. Generally, *safih* means ignorant that is intellectually weak and therefore he is not well informed of what is beneficial and what is harmful, either in worldly or religious matters.[4] It includes innocent kind of silliness, like one who is not capable of looking after one's own property and well-being. *Safih* also refers to a person who lacks of religious knowledge, a liar who used to say things contrary to what he knows, and a stubborn person who refuses to listen to the truth.[5] Muhammad Asad elaborates the meaning of "Middlemost Community" as follow:

"… a community that keeps an equitable balance between extremes and is realistic in its appreciation on man's nature and possibilities, rejecting both licentiousness and exaggerated asceticism. In tune with its oft-repeated call to moderation in every aspect of life, the Qur'an exhorts the believers not to place too great an emphasis on the physical and material aspects of their lives, but postulates, at the same time, that man's urges and desires relating to this "life of the flesh" are God-willed and, therefore, legitimate. On further analysis, the expression "a community of the middle way" might be said to summarize, as it were, the Islamic attitude towards the problem of man's existence as such: a denial of the view that there is an inherent conflict between the spirit and the flesh, and a bold affirmation of the natural, God-willed unity in this twofold aspect of human life. This balance attitude, peculiar to Islam, flows directly from the concept of God's oneness and, hence, of the unity of purpose underlying all His creation".[6]

Based on the above Qur'anic citation and what has been explained by Asad, it is clear that the most important characteristic of *wasatiyyah* is justice. It includes justice to Allah, justice to the religion of *Tawhid*, justice to fellow men and all creatures, justice to nature and justice to oneself. Those qualities need to be present otherwise, the *ummah* cannot be the witnesses against those people who have failed to fulfil the divine trust placed upon their shoulders. As a matter of fact, justice requires a person to be in the middle-most position between two or more opposing sides without inclining to any party by emotion, bias or prejudice.

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[3] Abu al-Husayn Ibn Faris (1999), *Mu'jam Maqayis al-Lughah*, Beirut: Daar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, vol.2, 340.
[4] Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, (1412H / 2000), *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an*, ed. Muhammad Shakir Muassasat al-Risalah, vol.1, 293.
[5] Abu Muhammad al-Baghawi (1997), *Ma'alim al-Tanzil fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Beirut: Dar Tayyibah li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi, vol. 1, 67.
[6] Muhammad Asad (2011), *The Message of the Qur'an*, London: Dar Andalus, 80.

The noun *al-wasat* which is literally mean the middle, the middlemost and the center, is referring to the connection of all sides that of equal distance, such as the center of a circle. Then the word is borrowed in order to describe the praiseworthy of human quality that is in between of being excessive (*ifrat*) and laxity (*tafrit*). Wise saying of Arab states: "*Khairul al-'umur al-awsat*" (the best of affairs is in the middle position). Therefore, when it was said the Quraish tribe is "*awsat al-Arab*", it means that it was the best tribe, just as when it was said that the prophet was "*wasatan fi qawmihi*" it means that the prophet was the noblest among his people genealogically.[7] The word "*awsatuhum*" in the following verse, "The most reasonable of them (*awsatuhum*) said, "Did I not say to you, if only you would glorify?"[8] has been interpreted by the Qur'anic commentators as "the most just of them" (*'adaluhum*). This interpretation is agreed by al-Razi in his *tafsir* in which he says, "The most just place for deciding something is to be in the middle, because its judgement with regard to all its sides is the same and equal".[9] Some principles regarding justice and connotations of *wasatiyyah* or moderation are:

- Justice (*al-Adl*)[10]
  This is the central meaning of the *wasatiyyah* concept as it is reflected in the verse: "Thus we have appointed you a Moderate Community (*ummatan wasatan*)"[11]. Scholars found that there are two possible meanings for the word *wasat*; one is justice, the other is goodness. However, these two meanings have no contradiction because to be justice is good and goodness is within moderation.
- Excellence, Best and Goodness (*al-khairiyyah*)[12]
  Wasatiyyah comes with the characteristic of being excellence, best and goodness (*al-khairiyyah*). Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was described as a man who is the best among his people (*awsat qawmihi*) and he came from the highly respected family chain among the Arab community.
- Balance (*al-Tawassut, al-Tawazun, al-I'tidal*)[13]
  Today's state of affairs is very challenging as there are so many groups existed claiming to be the most rightful group of certain religions and the rest are wrong doers and must be punished. The concept of *wasatiyyah* is then appropriate to distinguish between excessive approach (*ifraat*) or laxity or liberal approach (*tafrit*).[14]
- Straightness (*al-Istiqomah*)
  The straight way or the straight path is also the middle position as compared to wrong paths surrounding it. For this reason, a Muslim is taught to ask from Allah guidance to the straight path seventeen times a day by reciting *Surah al-Fatihah* while establishing five daily prayers. This indicates that Muslim Ummah who walk on the Straight Path are those who avoid the extreme of religious practices.[15]
- Strength (*al-Quwwah*)
  Being in the middle position is a sign of strength as well, just as it is resembled to the youth age that has intermediary physical condition i.e., between the weakness of childhood and the weakness of old age.[16]

Religious Tolerance and Moderation in the Past

Since the very beginning of Islamic era, Islam has always promoted moderation and tolerance or *wasatiyyah*. In the Qur'an, Allah s.w.t calls the Jews and Christians not to exceed the religious boundary. Allah says:

> "O People of the Book, (Jews and Christians) do not go beyond the bounds in your religion and do not say concerning Allah (anything) except the Truth. Surely al-Masih, Isa son of Maryam, was only the Messenger of Allah, and His Word that He cast forth to Maryam, and a Spirit from Him. So, believe in Allah and His Messengers, and do not say, "Three." Refrain; most charitable is it for you; surely Allah is only One God. All Extolment be to Him-that He should have a child. To Him (belongs) whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth; and Allah suffices for an Ever-Trusted Trustee."[17]

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[7] Yusuf al-Qaradawi, (n.d.), *Al-Khasais al-Aammah lil Islam,* Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 70.
[8] Surah al-Qalam (68): 28.
[9] Abul Fadl Muhammad al-Razi, (1981), *Al-Tafsir al-Kabir,* Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, vol.30, 90.
[10] Surah al-Nisa (4): 135.
[11] Surah al-Baqarah (2): 143.
[12] Surah Ali Imran (3): 110.
[13] Surah Luqman (31): 18.
[14] Abdullah Md. Zin, (2012), *Pendekatan Wasatiyyah dalam Menghayati 1Malaysia,* Kuala Lumpur: MPH Group Printing, 4th edn, 51.
[15] M. Kamal Hassan, (2011), *Voice of Islamic Moderation from the Malay World,* Selangor: IIUM Printing, 164.
[16] Ibid., 165.
[17] Surah al-Nisaa (4): 171.

Ibn Kathir in his exegesis explains the above verse as follow:

> "Allah forbids the People of the Scriptures from going to extremes in religion, which is a common trait of theirs, especially among the Christians. The Christians exaggerated over `Isa until they elevated him above the grade that Allah gave him. They elevated him from the rank of prophethood to being a God, whom they worshipped just as they worshipped Allah. They exaggerated even more in the case of those who they claim were his followers, claiming that they were inspired, thus following every word they uttered whether true or false, be it guidance or misguidance, truth or lies."[18]

The Qur'an refers the Jews and Christians as People of the Book. They were among the most discussed subject in the Qur'an and Islamic history due to their proximity to Islam. History has demonstrated how Islam allows non-Muslim to practise religious freedom, especially to the People of the Book. The freedom continued during the period of the Caliphate *al-Rashidun* as well as the following Islamic rules. Jews in particular has enjoyed numerous privilege under Islamic governance and yet they returned the favour viciously. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has shown a great deal of tolerance to non-Muslims during his lifetime both in Mecca and Madinah. In one authentic Hadith, the prophet said, "Anyone who hurts a *dhimmi*[19] hurts me, and who hurts me, hurts Allah".[20] In another hadith, the Prophet said, "whosoever persecutes a *dhimmi* or usurps his rights or took work from him with evil intentions, I shall be a complainant against him on the Day of Resurrection".[21]

It has been witnessed that, when Prophet Muhammad migrated to Madinah in 622 CE, he introduced a treaty that has granted freedom of worship, protection of their place of worship, their life and their property to everyone in the city, including the Jewish tribe. This practice has been respected and safeguarded throughout Islamic history. During the early years of Madinah period, several Christian elders, learned man and religious leaders from Najran had an intense debate with the Prophet about the Islamic standpoint on Christianity. About halfway during the discussion, the Christian delegation went out to perform their mass (prayer). The Prophet invited them to perform their prayer in the mosque, which they did. When their dialogue with the Prophet had ended, the Christians signed a treaty in which the Prophet guaranteed to protect their religious rights and to preserve the sanctity of their monastery, provided the reciprocated by showing respect for Islam and the emerging Islamic state in Madinah.[22]

Another incident that reflects the tremendous tolerance and respect given to non-Muslims was following the Battle of *Khaybar*, whereupon the Prophet ordered all scriptures taken from the Jews to be returned to them. The event shows what a high regard the Prophet had for their scriptures. His tolerant and considerate behaviour impressed the Jews that the Prophet did nothing which trifled with their sacred scriptures.[23] When the Romans conquered Jerussalem in 114 CE, they expelled all Jews from the city and imposed a complete ban on their re-entry. In contrast, when Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab conquered Jerusalem in 638 CE, Christians and the Jews were allowed to stay.[24] The text of the treaty of surrender of Jerusalem was written by Mu'awiyah and signed by the Caliph and by Sophronius, Patriarch of the City on behalf of the Christians, says:

> "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. This is the guarantee granted to the inhabitants of Aelia by Umar, Servant of God, Commander of the believers. He guaranteed for them the safety of their persons, of their goods, of their churches and crosses – whether in good state of repair or otherwise – and generally of their religion. The churches will not be changed into dwellings, nor destroyed. Neither they nor their other properties will suffer any damage whatever. In matters religious, no coercion will be exercised against them, nor will any of them be hurt."[25]

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[18] Abi al-Fidaa Ismail Ibn Kathir, (1997), *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, (Beyrut: Dar Ihya Turath al-'Araby, vol.1, 517.

[19] *Dhimmi* is a non-Muslim citizen of an Islamic state.

[20] Abu Qasim Sulayman Ibn Ahmad al-Tabarani, (1995), *Al-Mu'jam Awsat*, Cairo: Dar al-Haramayn, vol.4, 373, no hadith: 2632.

[21] Abu Bakar Ahmad Ibn al-Husayn Ibn Ali al-Baihaqi, (2011), *Al-Sunan al-Kabir*, Cairo: Dar al-Hijr, vol. 5, 205.

[22] Syed Othman al-Habshi and Faisal Haji Othman, (1994), "Principles of Tolerance in Islam and the Historical Practices", in *Islam and Tolerance*, Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur: IKIM, 59.

[23] Ahmad F. Yousif, (1998), *Religious Freedom, Minorities and Islam: an Inquiry into the Malaysian Experience*, Selangor: Thinker's Library, 41.

[24] Syed Othman Alhabshi et.al, (1994), *Op.cit*, 61.

[25] Ismail R. al-Faruqi, (1979), "Rights of Non-Muslims Under Islam: Social and Cultural Aspects", in *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs,* Vol 1:1, 99.

Four centuries later (in 1099 CE), the harmonious atmosphere which existed under the Muslim rule ended when Christian crusaders captured Jerusalem and were merciless toward all non-Christians including many innocent people. The Christian victory over Jerusalem did not last long however. Less than a century later in 1187 CE, Jerusalem was recaptured by Muslim caliph Salahuddin al-Ayyubi and was returned to be the city of the three semitic religions. Muslims ruled Spain for 800 years, during which time Jews and Christian lived harmoniously and were allowed a great level of religious freedom. When the Christian finally recaptured Granada in 1492 CE, Muslims and Jews who remained behind were given the choice of baptism, exile or death.[26] While the Muslims had shown great tolerance and respect for Christianity, it was obviously no place for Muslims in the once lost and now re-conquered lands of Christendom.[27]

The most contemporary historical example of Muslim tolerance toward non-Muslims was demonstrated by Muslims during the Ottoman period. During that time, all non-Muslims were allowed to follow their own religions, provided that they respected Muslim supremacy and paid their taxes. The administrative system employed by the Ottomans, known as the *millet* system, regarded religious communities as autonomous social units, which enjoyed both administrative and legal independence. Each millet was headed by clergymen who were responsible for the civil status, judicial process, church property, education, charity and even tax collection. This system allows Christian, Jews and Muslims to live side by side in the same state under the same sovereign, yet remain subject to different laws and officials, served the Ottoman Empire well for four centuries".[28] Due to the immense tolerance, freedom and autonomy given to religious communities, Istanbul became a safe haven for all kinds of religious refugees from Europe. According to Lewis, the Turkish capital in the 17th century was "probably the only city in Europe where Christians of all creeds and persuasion could live in reasonable security and argue their various schism and heresies. Nowhere in Christendom was this possible".[29]

The history has shown that moderation, toleration or *wasatiyyah* was the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, his companion and early Muslims. A leader who strikes *wasatiyyah* upon the people has proven to be very effective and indeed extend the duration of successful leadership. Those periods of harmony in Islamic civilisation were fill of the joyful milieu enjoyed by all parties regardless of their background. The human nature is inclined to treasure lifetime of peaceful surrounding. Indeed, *wasatiyyah* is one of the successful fruits of Islamic civilization for both theoretical conception and experimental application. Thus, it is established that Islam has initiated an interreligious harmony through the concept of *wasatiyyah*. Fazlur Rahman stated in this regard:

> "The Islamic civilisation was the first in the world which brought about a highly fruitful co-operation among peoples of different faiths, cultures and races in the fields of science and philosophy, medicine and literature. As a result a brilliant intellectual culture was produced wherein Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and others participated on an equal footing".[30]

The Challenge of *Wasatiyyah* in the Contemporary Muslim World

Ahmad Yousif has discussed fundamentalism as one of the big challenges faced by the contemporary Muslim world. He found that there has been strong tendency to associate Islam with the term "fundamentalism" despite many scholars are arguing and identifying profoundly the real context of the issues. Fundamentalism has interestingly always led to fanaticism even though they both came from different roots. Its origin comes from Christian ethics and tradition while fanaticism means going into extreme and overly zealous regarding an issue, idea, opinion or action. Ahmad Yousif indicates the trend of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism in the recent decades in his works as follows:[31]

I. Back in November 1979, at 5:30 am, a powerful force of armed militants at the Grand Mosque in Mecca (Saudi Arabia) pushed their way into the praying crowd and declared that

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[26] Bernard Lewis, (1993), *Islam and the West*, New York: Oxford University Press, 11.
[27] Ahmad F. Yousif, (2011), *Religious Freedom, Minorities and Islam: an Inquiry into the Malaysian Experience*, Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Printing, 2nd edn, 42.
[28] Roderic H. Davison, (1990), "Essays in Ottoman and Turkish History, 1774-1923", in *The Impact of the West*, Texas: Saqi Books, 17.
[29] Bernard Lewis, (1993), *Op.cit*, 81.
[30] Fazlur Rahman, (1986), "Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State", in *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, (Vol. VII (7), no. 1, 18.
[31] Ahmad F. Yousif, (2012), "Fundamentalism and Fanaticism: A Comparative Analysis," in *Religious Studies and Theology* 30, no. 1, 3–26.

the long-awaited Mahdi (Messiah) had arrived. The more than 300 members of this militant band and their families were led by Juhaiman al-Utaiba, who had come to cleanse Islam before the end of the world.

II.   Following that incident in September 1982, hundreds of Palestinians in the Beirut refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila were slaughtered by the Christian militia with the tacit consent of the occupying Israeli army.

III.   Year after, in April 1983, the U.S. embassy in Beirut was demolished by a suicide bomber in which seventeen people were killed. In the same year, the U.S. Marine Corps barracks near the Beirut Airport was levelled by a suicide truck in which 241 died. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for both attacks.

IV.   In June 1984, the Indian government invaded the Sikh Golden Temple, resulting in the deaths of more than 1000 Sikhs. Sikh nationalists revenged the attack with the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Ghandi later that same year, and also with the hijack and destruction of an Air India 747 jet the following year. Those shocking incident took places in very close years.

V.   The shootings at a Jewish day care center in California on August 10, 1999, by a Christian Identity activist rekindled the fear and anger evoked by the bombing of the Atlanta Olympic Games, the 1995 devastation of the Oklahoma City federal building, and a rash of abortion clinic attacks throughout the decade.

VI.   Beginning in the aftermath of September 2001, suicide bombing become the major weapon of armed struggle for Palestinian. By the end of June, 2002, the total casualties for Palestinians far exceeded that of Israeli Jews. Suicide bombings have instilled fear and hurt the economy in Israel, but Palestinians suffering has nevertheless far surpassed Israeli Jewish suffering.[32]

The new millennium has witnessed long standing political conflicts of a grave nature around the world involving several Muslim communities such as Palestinians, Bosnians, Albanians, Chechens, Afghans, Kurds, Iraqis, Kashmiris, Uighers and Moros. The tragic events of 9/11 have caused a massive Islamophobia in the West. Many non-Muslims have come to believe that Islam is a religion of intolerance, militancy, barbarism, or terrorism. The media has portrayed Islam as the enemy of modernisation, cultural pluralism and human rights. As a result, a deep mistrust of each other has developed in the West and in the Muslim world. As a matter of fact, of all religious communities, the existence of phenomenon of extremism, radicalism or militancy is confined to a very small group which misunderstood the concept *Jihad fi sabil Allah* (Striving in the path of Allah).[33] Furthermore, these acts of small groups got viral and developed into massive misunderstanding in the West. To the non-Muslim today, *Jihad* is generally understood as holy war or any kind of terrorist act, while the actual meaning is much wider than what has been confined. Consequently, those who espouse the use of violence are mistaken in assuming that it is obligatory to fight the disbelievers even though they are at peace with the Muslims. In this regard, those who subscribe this idea are guilty of transgressing the limits imposed by Allah as stated in the Qur'an, "..And fight in Allah's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression, for verily Allah does not love aggressor".[34] Contrary to the claim of some militants, this verse is not abrogated for a particular time and place, rather the categorical statement that "*verily Allah does not love aggressors*" is a permanent principle in Islam.

The association of *jihad* with terrorism in the media is a gross distortion of Islamic teaching. The problem of extremism is a problem shared by all religions. Such association is a result of prejudice toward Islam and Muslim communities. The prejudice has happened due to the current state of Muslim world which are struggling to address local challenges in their respective nations and these have triggered extremism from the minority of Muslim population.[35] Islam is a religion of peace and moderation which encourages its followers to avoid excessiveness and laxity. The Qur'anic discourse on *wasatiyyah* indicates that Allah has chosen Muslims to be the genuine believers of Islamic monotheism (*tawhid*), follower of the *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad, and a

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[32] *Ibid*.
[33] Hood, Ralph W., P. C. Hill, and W. P. Williamson, (2005), *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*. New York: The Guilford Press, 155-156.
[34] Surah al-Baqarah (2): 190.
[35] M. Kamal Hassan (2011), *Op.cit*, 160.

community justly balanced (*ummatan wasatan*). The commentaries of the verse 143 in *surah al-Baqarah* tells us that Islam came to moderate the ways of previous nations which had either become extremely legalistic or had gone to the opposite extreme. Muslims are advised to live their life in balance between spiritual and worldly activities. They are warned not to neglect worldly affairs while focusing on religious duties. Even when it comes to performing good deeds, Muslim are encouraged to pursue a path of moderation.

Manifestation of *wasatiyyah* in the Islamic teaching can be seen through various modes. In terms of worship or '*ibadah*, Islam represents a middle position between religions of faiths which marginalise the aspect of Divinity or transcendence so as to focus on humanistic morality and those which require their followers to cut off their ties with worldly life in order to lead a life of total spiritual devotion or monasticism.[36] This worship designed by Allah within the capacity of Muslim to perform and not beyond that. For example, the five daily prayers or *Solah* is a compulsory worship and the most important one. This *ibadah* comes with consequences both good and bad. Good for those who perform it and bad for those who leave it according to *Shari'ah* or Islamic law. Allah said in the Holy Qur'an, "Verily, the prayer is enjoined on the believers at fixed hours".[37]

There are numbers of verses and *hadith* (Prophetic tradition) explaining about the obligatory of *solah*. This worship is made compulsory to all Muslims whatever their status and conditions. However, Allah did not obliged Muslim to observe some obligations which are beyond their capacity. Islamic law stated numbers of condition applied when they fall under category of trouble, difficulties or emergency, for example, a sick person, a traveller, in the war zone, and so on. The *Shari'ah* rules easier ways in such conditions in order not to be a burden to Muslim.[38] In addition, the manner to perform *Solah* is purely based on the companions' observation to the way of Prophet Muhammad do it, as the following hadith mentions, "Pray as you have seen me praying".[39]

There was a moment when the companion came to the Prophet asking about the time frame of daily prayer. The Prophet did not reply at that moment, instead he started his day by performing the five daily prayers on the next day at the earliest time respectively. In the following day, however, the Prophet carried out the prayers at the end of its permissible time. Only then he replied to the person who asked the question, "the prayer times are in between those time scale" by giving examples of committing the prayer both at an early and end of permissible time.[40] The flexible proportion in the time frame for performing daily prayer was a clear sign of moderate and tolerance elements in worship practices. Though Islamic teachings urge Muslims to perform prayer at earliest time, however in certain conditions, constraints that might have happened are taken into consideration. It shows that Islam is all about Allah's blessing and mercy and Islamic teaching is compassionate to all human being.

Muslims are advised to balance their spiritual and material concerns by focusing on religious duties and paying attention to worldly affairs. In the area of performing good deeds and religious duties, they are encouraged to pursue moderation. Muslims are encouraged to give charity but also reminded not to squander their wealth to those who will waste it. For Muslims, the Sunnah is the living example on how the Prophet implemented the Qur'anic instructions. They believe that his specific words, actions and practices further endorse the fact that Islam frowns upon any extremism of fanaticism. On numerous occasions, Prophet Muhammad stressed that religion should be a matter of ease as opposed to one of hardship and extremism. The Prophet said, "Make things easy for the people and do not make it difficult for them, and make them calms (with glad tidings) and do not repulse (them)."[41] The Prophet was also narrated to always choose the easier of two matters when he was given the choice.[42]

Furthermore, Yusuf al-Qaradawi has stated seven necessary changes that Islamic movements and activists should undergo to counter the militant or extremist tendencies among the youth and religious groups:

1. Changing from form and outer appearance to reality and substance.
   Al-Qaradawi states that the substance of Islam is not about growing the beard and lengthening it, shortening the robe, carrying the *miswak*, joining one's foot with other's foot in prayer, placing the hands on the chest or above the navel and so on. The substance of Islam to him is the '*aqidah* as *tawhid,* that of *ibadah* is

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[36] *Ibid.*, 166.
[37] Surah al-Nisa': 103.
[38] Majdi Muhammad Surur Basalum, (2004), *Al-Wasatiyyah fi al-Fikr al-Islami,* Beirut: Daar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1st ed, 113-114.
[39] Al-Bukhari, (2010), *Sahih al-Bukhari*, the Book of al-Azan, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, vol. 8, 91.
[40] Majdi Muhammad Surur Basalum, (2004), *Op.cit,* 115.
[41] Al-Bukhari, (2010), *Sahih al-Bukhari*, the Book of al-Adab, chapter "The Statement of the Prophet 'Facilitate Things for the People and Do Not Make Thing Difficults for Them, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, vol. 8, 91.
[42] Al-Bukhari, (2010), *Op.cit,* 92.

sincerity, that of *mu'amalah* is truthfulness, that of *khulq* is mercy, that of *tashri* (legislation) is justice, that of *'amal* is perfection, that of *adab* is spiritual consciousness, that of human bonds is brotherhood and that of civilization is balance.

2. To change from talking and bickering to giving and doing.
   Muslims have to overcome several negative habits such as looking for the mistakes of others instead of self-criticism.

3. From sentimental (*'aifiyyah*) and demagogic attitude (*ghawgha'iyyah*) to a rational and scientific attitude.
   "…and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just, that is next to piety".[43]

4. Change from preoccupation with the subsidiary and periphery to the primary and fundamental.
   The preoccupation with subsidiary, optional and minor matters of religion runs the risk of contravening the Qur'anic and Prophetic methods, sidelining the bigger and more urgent matters.

5. Change from bigotry (*al-ta'asub*) and exclusivism (*al-istithna'*) to forbearance (*al-tasamuh*) and inclusivism (*al-tashmil*).
   Fanaticism and bigotry are not part of Islam. An absolutist fanatical attitude towards a group, regardless if the group is right or wrong, is a *jahiliyyah* characteristic condemned by the Prophet.

6. Change from violence and rancour to gentleness and compassion
   The main attributes of *da'wah* is gentleness and proven to be effective for the Islamic propagation.[44]

At this juncture, it is clear that *wasatiyyah* plays a constructive role in changing an individual's perception, observance and commitment to his faith, community and oneself. The application of *wasatiyyah* has proven to have a positive correlation with the prominence and observance of Islamic teachings.

Moderation from the Malay World: The Plural Societies

Muslim communities in Southeast Asia or more specifically in Malay-Indonesia sphere, relatively speaking are the most tolerant and accommodative Muslim communities in the world, despite the Western media's tendency to sensationalize or exaggerate news about the incidents of Muslim violence or militant attacks.[45] If there are exceptions, as in the case of the Moro in Mindanao, in Southern Philippines, the Patani Malays of Southern Thailand, or the Acehnese Indonesians in Indonesia, these are due to the long bitter history of injustice or oppression by their central governments, or aggressive Christian evangelization in Muslim dominant areas, or the infiltration by external militant elements who do not represent the wishes and aspirations of the masses of the elites.[46]

In the Malay-Indonesian world, the Muslims have lived together with non-Muslim minorities of various ethnic groups for a very long time. They have learned to co-exist harmoniously with others. They have also accepted the democratic political system adapted to local conditions, in which Islam is allowed to play an important cultural and political role within the framework of the national constitution and national ideologies. It should be pointed out that the idea and practice of sharing political power between Muslims and non-Muslims is the hallmark of the Muslim community of Malaysia and Indonesia, while this would be seen as fiction and impossible in several Middle Eastern countries.

According to Mutallib, Malaysia exemplifies the phenomenon of social and cultural pluralism. This diversity extends beyond the simple ethnic composition of the population. It includes differences in religion, attire, food and eating habits, attitude and social customs.[47] The population in Malaysia is just over 28 million as of the 2010 census. As far as the religious breakdown of the society is concerned, 61.3% of the population identified themselves as Muslims, 19.8% as Buddhist, 9,2% as Christians, 6.3% as Hinduism, and 1.3% practice Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religion.[48]

Religion is a key aspect of ethnic identity and solidarity in Malaysia. Accordingly, individuals of Malay ethnicity are automatically identified as Muslims, regardless of whether they are practising Islam or not. For Chinese, they are largely Buddhist and Indians are primarily Hindu adherents although there are significant

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[43] Surah al-Maidah (5): 8.

[44] Yusuf al-Qaradawi, (2002), *Al-Sahwa al-Islamiyyah min al-Murttaqah ila al-Rushd,* Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 50-52.

[45] Hussin Mutalib, (1990), *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 26.

[46] M. Kamal Hassan, (2015), *The Concept of Wasatiyyah and the Place of Islamic Moderation*, Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 19-20.

[47] Hussin Mutalib, (1990), *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 26.

[48] "Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics", Department of Statistics, Malaysia. p.82. https://www.statistics.gov.my/, retrieved: 4 October 2011.

numbers of Indian Christians, Muslim and Sikhs. It should be stated that Malaysia is not an Islamic state, however it is also not a secular state. According to the 1957 Constitution of Independence or Merdeka, "Islam is the religion of the Federation" and the Sultans are the Head of religion in their respective states.[49]Although Islam is the official religion of the Malaysian Federation, Article 11(1) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution guarantees all citizens the freedom to profess and practice his or her own faith, as well as the right to propagate this faith.[50]

The difficulty of governing and accommodating such a diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic population cannot be underestimated. The leadership of Malaysia recognize the need of all groups to work together and also acknowledging the great sensitivities involved. The values of social integration, pragmatic approach, harmony, cohesion and religious freedom are to be inculcated among all members of society. Malaysians are continuously urged to understand, tolerate and respect each other. In 1980, in a speech to the nation to mark his fiftieth birthday, the Sultan Iskandar ibn Sultan Ismail stressed the need for Muslims to uphold the principles of solidarity, tolerance and sensible actions, which he argued were the essential traits of a decent community, living in multi-racial and multi-religious country like Malaysia.[51] Malaysia Prime Minister, Mahathir is also a strong advocate of such values. During the "Conference on Islam and Tolerance" in 1994, he asserted:

> "It should be understood that even the Qur'an had made it clear that there was no compulsion in religion and that Muslims were required to have good ties with non-Muslims who did not develop animosity towards them. If all Muslims know and understand the teaching of Islam from the Qur'an, and *sunnah*, from books and history, not only will their ties with non-Muslims improve, but also non-Muslims will really understand the teaching and principles of Islam. With this, it will improve the Islamic tolerance in relation to all parties".[52]

In the same way, the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia during that period, Anwar Ibrahim has frequently stressed the need for tolerance and respect. He has been quoted as saying:

> "As Muslims and as Southeast Asians, we cherish this heritage of cultural and religious diversity. This living together would not be possible without mutual tolerance or respect and being moderate in the conduct of our affairs".[53]

Along with the constitutional guarantees and political support for an idea of religious tolerance, the non-Muslims have enjoyed the luxury of freedom in their religious practice in Malaysia. The Information Malaysia Yearbook estimates that there are more than 3500 Buddhist temples, societies and organizations located in all major cities and towns throughout the country.[54] Many temples hold weekly programmes such as *Dhamma* (good conduct or moral instruction), talks, meditation, language and public speaking classes, Buddhism courses, seminar camps and religious talks. Large statue of the Buddha can be located in several states in Malaysia.[55] As for the Hinduism, there are approximately 350 major temples across the country and more than 5000 minor temples or shrines located in the countryside, villages, palm oil estates, etc. *Deepavali* and *Thaipusam* are two big festival of Hinduism which granted public holiday from the government. The Sri Maha Mariamman Temple is the oldest, most prestigious and affluent Hindu temple in Malaysia. Located in edge of Kuala Lumpur, this temple is a home for great huge statue of Lord Murugan the Hindu deity.[56]

Malaysia has chosen to apply the principle of moderation to ensure the sustainability of their interreligious harmony for many years. It is proven to be effective especially for the non-Muslims who enjoy significantly prosperous life which hard to find elsewhere. Malaysian authority acts promptly toward any possible element to destruct this harmony. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the difficulties of governing such multi ethnic, multi religions community is so challenging. Malaysian people are so sensitive and easily relate problems arise to

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[49] Fred R. Van Der Mehden, (1986), *Religion and Modernization in Southeast Asia*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 191.
[50] Ahmad F. Yousif, (2011), *Op.cit*, 57.
[51] Hussin Mutalib, (1990), *Op.cit*, 148.
[52] *Ibid*., 63.
[53] Alex Choong, (1996), "Anwar: Islam's Pragmatic Approach Necessary to Realise Societal Ideals: Taking the Middle Path to Solving Problems", in *New Straits Times*. March 6, 1-2.
[54] Abdul Rahim Ismail and Hashim Hj. Md. Isa, (1995), *Information Malaysia Yearbook*, Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn. Bhd., 13.
[55] Ahmad F. Yousif, (2011), *Op.cit*, 69.
[56] *Ibid*., 116.

ethnicity. The situation worsens with the current political status who displays sensitivity among Chinese and Indians. The opposition parties (KeADILAN and PAS) need to form a collaboration with Chinese parties (DAP) to win the election and the collaboration proven to be effective, however many elements from the Islamic parties were being inconvenience to have a strategic partnership with non-Muslims. This scenario could be intentionally triggered as we are aware that everything is possible in politics, which is so unfortunate. Several cases of religious intolerance were recorded and getting increased.

An incident related to religious tolerance took place in Malaysia which is quite interesting to observe. One of NGOs group in Malaysia has invited a prominent scholar Dr. Zakir Naik to give series of lectures throughout Malaysia during 12-18 April 2016. Dr. Zakir arrived safely at Terengganu and started his lecture and no riots nor chaos recorded. In the mean time, a group of Hindu's and Christian NGOs made a police report mentioning that Dr. Zakir's visit will cause for a chaos because of his provocative lecture. The Head of Malaysian Police supported soon after issued a statement that "such program (Dr. Zakir's lecture) brings no good and will endanger the harmony of religion in Malaya, therefore should be cancelled". This called for a number of responses from religious experts and authorities. Finally the Head of Malaysia's Police withdrawn his statement and allow the program to be held again. Apparently, being tolerance for many years as a majority Muslims sometimes could not affect the non-Muslim to behave the same as a return to the favour. It is an irony when Dr. Zakir who came from India as the biggest Hinduism land and did not receive a rejection from Hindus in their main land but were questioned by Hindu minorities in the majority Muslim land, i.e., Malaysia. The government seems to be very careful at handling the issue.

Human life is full of suffering in one way or the other because the world itself is the source of human suffering. Therefore, one has to learn to regard conflict as part of the tribulations one has to face in worldly life, thereby acquiring the serenity and the mindfulness needed to avoid the negative effects of conflicts. However, the inferior thinking a person nurtures emotional reactions which, in the end, results in harmful consequences to himself or herself as well as to others.[57]

The differences of ethnicity, cultural, and languages of humanity are part of the beauty in God's creation. People might opt to choose the best conduct for harmonious living or destroy all the possibilities of living together peacefully. In fact, beauty lies in variety. For a community to be beautiful and strong is to interact with each other's dissimilarity in positive ways. It is clearly instructed by the Qur'an and Sunnah, that a Muslim should be good to his neighbours regardless of they are Muslims or non-Muslims. Similarly, Islam strongly emphasises to a Muslim to behave in the best ways with his parents and relatives by showing his love, compassion and fairness, which are the essence of *wasatiyyah* implication.[58]

Conclusion

Islam is a religion of peace and moderation, which encourages Muslims to avoid extravagance and excess. The Qur'an addresses the Muslim community as an *ummah* that is 'justly balance'. Muslims have been advised by the Qur'an and Sunnah to have a balance life in in terms of spiritual and materialistic endeavours. While they are required to focus on religious duties, they are also warned not to neglect the worldly affairs. Even when it comes to performing good deeds, Muslims are encouraged to pursue a path of moderation. The *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad is the living example of the Qur'an and reflects to the real Islamic identity. Prophet Muhammad on numerous occasions stressed the fact that religion should be a matter of ease and not hardship for the people. In today's plural world and social media control, being extremist is not a wise option and could negatively portrayed Islamic image to the world. Religious tolerance has been a hundred years of practice within the Muslim society and proven to be very much effective. The failure to understand the beauty of the concept is not the failure of Islam. Hence, it is due to one's neglected of the Islamic civilisation historical fact. The complexity of religious life in the modern world can be seen through all religions and not only in Islam. The problem always lies between being excessive or too liberal in the religious practices and dogma. All civilizations will fall when they misunderstood the concept of freedom. Freedom goes with *wasatiyyah* and with the right approach to mankind, for the sake of his well-being. If freedom is a right, it belongs to the positive qualities and virtues, and if it is deprived from human's nature, then it is not the standard of practise. Same marriage sex for example, is a kind of freedom that is unnatural and has caused chaos to human's descendant. People of the Prophet Lut and Fir'aun for example were demolished when they misbehaved. And the glorious

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[57] M. Kamal Hassan, (2011), *Op.cit*, 36.
[58] Abdul Hamid Ahmad Abu Sulayman, (2015), *The Application of Wasatiyyah in the Contemporary Muslim World*, Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 46.

Muslim civilisation also fell down when their leaders were drunk and racists. In short, to have a sustainable interreligious harmony in plural societies, the Muslim *ummah* should be first practise the principle of *wasatiyyah* that has been demonstrated to bring prosperous, justice, and tolerance among societies in the past generations of early Islamic civilisation.

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