



What Is a Moderate Muslim?

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Colaboraciones n° 769

January 26, 2006

As we enter 2006, Islamic radicalism remains no less a challenge to the world than it did four years ago. One of its chief aspects involves how non-Muslims, who typically have little knowledge of Islam, may accurately identify Muslim moderates.

Muslim moderation is defined by attitudes and conduct, not by abstractions or historical precedents, which, as with all religions, may be interpreted to support any ideological position. Observing and analyzing Sunni Muslims by such positive, practical criteria is extremely easy. There are more than a billion Sunnis in the world, and they are not all jihadists or fundamentalists, so telling them apart should not be difficult with a little effort. Identifying moderate Shia Muslims is harder, but one thing may be said immediately: those who follow Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq prove their moderation daily, by their silent but effective support to the U.S.-led liberation coalition.

Moderate Sunni Muslims may be recognized in person by asking a simple question: "what do you think of Wahhabism, the state Islamic sect of Saudi Arabia?" Every Muslim in the world knows about Wahhabism, and knows that it is embodied in al-Qaida. If a Sunni Muslim is asked about Wahhabism and states that it is a controversial, extreme doctrine that causes many problems because of Saudi money, the respondent is probably moderate. Denouncing the Saudis alone is not enough; radicals criticize the Saudi monarchy for insufficiently enforcing Wahhabi beliefs. The root cause of Sunni terror is Wahhabism, not the monarchy.

It seems unnecessary to add that those who try to disclaim a link between Wahhabism and al-Qaida, or who blame al-Qaida on American machinations, cannot be considered moderates. If a Sunni denies that Wahhabism exists by saying "there is only Islam," or tries to cover Wahhabism with an ameliorative term like "Salafism" -- a fraudulent

effort to equate Wahhabism with the pioneers of the Islamic faith -- the individual is an extremist. Such a radical will not, under any circumstances, declare his or her opposition to Wahhabism *per se*. They may even claim that the whole concept was invented by Westerners such as myself.

A parallel example may be cited from the history of Communism. Stalinist Communists would repudiate the charge that they were Communists, calling themselves progressives, liberals, or socialists. They would deny that Communism intended anything malign toward the U.S., portraying America as an aggressor (something Islamists and Stalinists have in common) but nonetheless claiming loyalty to it. They would often argue over whether Stalinism even existed. And they would never denounce Stalin, even though the entire planet knew about the atrocities of the Soviet regime. Neither will Islamist radicals denounce Wahhabism.

Moderate Muslims may also be identified by what they do not do, to contrast them with radicals. And at the top of that list comes the practice of *takfir*, or declaring Muslims unbelievers over differences of opinion. *Takfir* also includes describing the ordinary, traditional Muslim majority in the world as having fallen into unbelief.

Takfir is used to justify the radical Sunni massacres of Shia Muslims in Iraq. It underpins the ideology of the Saudi-Wahhabi sect, the extremist Sunni Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt, and the bloodthirsty Sunni jihadist movements in Pakistan. It also serves to bind together Muslim extremists through the illusion that they belong to a purified elite. Islam is not, and never was, a radical or fundamentalist religion in its mainstream practice, regardless of the fantasies of Islamist fanatics and Islamophobes alike.

Moderate Muslims do not engage in *takfir*. Shias shun *takfir*, including radical Shias, and Shias fighting against Sunnis who persecute them do not practice *takfir* against their foes. Enemies of terrorist Wahhabis do not accuse them of unbelief, but of criminality. Traditional Muslims avoid accusations of unbelief, as they were counseled to do by the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet never anticipated that Muslims would fall into unbelief.

Moderate Muslims, including Shias as well as Sunnis, also do not refer to followers of other religions, especially Jews and Christians, Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists, as unbelievers. The Koran never refers to Jews and Christians as unbelievers, but as People of the Book, worthy of respect and protection. Moderate Muslims adhere strictly to this outlook.

Moderate Muslims do not employ the rhetoric of jihad, including attempts to split hairs over the meaning of the term. Moderate Muslims seek a place in the contemporary world for Islam to be respected as a faith, not conflicts in which they may gamble on victory with the lives of others. Jihad vocabulary does nothing to advance the cause of Islam; it creates obstacles to it.

This does not mean moderate Muslims do not defend themselves when attacked. They do. But moderate Muslims in Iraq are under attacks from Sunni radicals, just as moderate Muslims were murdered by Serbs in the former Yugoslavia and moderate Muslims in Chechnya are killed by both Russian troops and Wahhabi adventurers. Iraqi Sunni radicals have more in common with Milosevic's fascist bands than with moderate Muslims. Wahhabis in the Caucasus have interests closer to those of Putin than those of ordinary Chechens, in that both seek a pretext for

war. And the Iraqi Sunni radicals and other Wahhabis, Putin the neo-Stalinist, and the Serbs all benefit from the same "antiwar" cheering section in the U.S.

Moderate Muslims also do not reject allegiance to non-Muslim governments. According to current interpretations of Shafi'i sharia, a major school of Islamic jurisprudence through history, there are no countries where Muslims are not required to obey local governments, for the security of their communities. Moderate Muslims do not proclaim public loyalty to such governments while privately counseling that Western governments are inferior to Muslim religious decrees. They do not invent civil rights violations as a political means of fighting Western authorities. Moderate Muslims recognize that Muslims have more rights and opportunities for advancement in most Western countries than in most Muslim lands.

Finally, moderate Muslims are not Arabocentric or trapped in the rhetoric of Pakistan and elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent. They recognize that the styles, idioms, and spiritual practices of Islam differ considerably from Mali to Malaysia and from Bosnia to Botswana. Moderate Muslims accept that such diversity should also exist among Muslims in the West; that there can and will be an Islam that is fully American in its culture, as Bosnians and Indonesians reflect the customs and cultures of their lands.

How do moderate Muslims deal with radicals?

Moderate Muslims admit there is a problem in the body of the religion -- not in the principles and traditions of the faith, but among the believers themselves. They recognize that radical ideology and terrorism threaten the future of Islam and must be stopped.

Moderate Muslims do not limit their struggle against extremism to perfunctory statements stating that terror is incompatible with the religion. Rather, moderate Muslims publicly identify, denounce, and combat radicals.

Is the Islamic establishment in the U.S. - the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and the Muslim Students Association of the U.S. and Canada (MSA) -- moderate? No, it is not. Not one of these three groups has ever identified or criticized a Muslim radical in the U.S., except to slander authentic moderates by trying to portray them as extremists. To cite a few notable examples: the aforementioned organizations, which I have called "the Wahhabi lobby,"

- accused the moderate author Khalid Duran of being a non-Muslim because they disagreed with an opinion he held (*takfir*);
- labeled the Sufi spiritual shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani a dangerous sectarian because he warned at the end of the 1990s that Islamist extremists in Russia were attempting to purchase nuclear materials;
- accused me of "jihadism" because I defended the Kosovar Albanians. In reality, I insisted on recognition that the Albanians are multireligious and that the Kosovo war was ethnic, not religious.

Meanwhile, however, the Wahhabi lobby has stood by every accused radical to appear before an American court, paying for their lawyers and inventing excuses for their transgressions.

Moderate Muslims do not come up with bogus fatwas and other gimmicks

to try to befoe the Western public. Nor do they suddenly remake themselves as Sufis to purge the record of their previous radical statements. Moderate Muslims know that the foundational texts, commentaries, and legal, philosophical and theosophical works of the religion suffice as a bulwark against extremism; that is why today's extremism is a new and radical, not a traditional or conservative, phenomenon. They also know that for a person to be called a Sufi, authentic spiritual study, based on meaningful traditions and precedents, must be the basis of his or her religious activity, not a search for instant credibility.

Finally, some moderate Muslims may seek to "reform" Islam, but moderates are not required to be "reformers." Many who today proclaim their desire to "reform" Islam are not moderate at all

in their manners and mental equipment; some are simply publicity seekers who think that by talking about "Islamic reformation" they will gain access to the non-Muslim public. Others are obsessed egomaniacs who consider arguing over an 800-year old text to be more important than defeating terrorist conspiracies. But Ibn abd al-Wahhab, founder of the eponymous sect 250 years ago, is proclaimed a reformer, and Saudi Wahhabis assert they have reformed Islam. Opportunism and sectarianism are ever the twin obstacles to the success of moderates who seek real improvement in society and especially, today, its interreligious relations.

Moderate Muslims concentrate on devotion to their religion, not on politics or public relations, and always recall that the Prophet called for his umma to be a community of moderation.

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