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THE MODERATION IN DIALOGUE:

ISLAM AND BUDDHISM

(AL-WASATIYAH AND MAJHIMA PATIPADA)

(A COMPARATIVE STUDY BY)

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Abstract: Islam, which conveys the message of peace, harmony and moderate way of life to the world by its name; and Buddhism, founded by the Buddha who was well-known as “Prince of Peace” (karuniraja) in the history, are identified as sources of extremism and violence in the recent years. Terms like ‘Islamic terrorism’, ‘Muslim fundamentalists’, ‘Extremists’ and ‘Radical Islamists’ are very common in the media. Similarly, Buddhism, especially the Theravada tradition is described in association with extremism and is identified as an instigating factor in ethnic conflicts in countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. This article, therefore, examines the moderation in Islam and Buddhism exploring textual ground of religious extremism.

Key Words: Moderation, al-Wasatiyah, Majhima Patipada Extremism, Terrorism, Dialogue and Multiculturalism

1. Background

The image of Islam and Muslims is being blemished in the world today. The media, especially after the 9/11 incident, depicts Islam in connotation with acts of violence, exploitation of women, denial of human rights and religious extremism. ‘Islamic Terrorism’ has become a term pervasive in Western political and academic traditions especially in counter terrorism discourse. These factors created an outpouring in Islamophobia in the West and non-Muslim countries including Sri Lanka where the people think the Muslim world as unstable, aggressive, hostile or as part of an ‘Axis of Evil’. The Hollywood film ‘Vishwaroopam’ and anti-Muslim campaigns launched by some extreme Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka explicit the vibration of Islamophobia in the Eastern world.

There are local and international scholars who have studied extremism and violence in association with Buddhism, especially the Theravada tradition. Mahinda Deegalla (2003) examined some important works that seek Buddhism as a source of extremism and violence in Sri Lanka. Beside this, Theravada tradition is accused of extremism and violence in the media in recent years. For instance, extremist Buddhist movements ‘Bodu Bala Sena’ (Buddhist Strong Army) and the Sinhala Ravana (Sinhala Echo), under the leadership of Buddhist monks Ven. Kirana Wewalaaththi Thera and Ven. Akoonamamu Dayaratana Thera respectively, claim religious grounds for their movements. Both of these extremist movements generated a lot of controversy in Sri Lanka against Muslims and Christians.

It is important to acknowledge that these extremist Buddhist movements like radical Muslim groups are marginal and relatively minority. They do not represent the views of the majority who are peace loving, fair minded and pluralistic in nature. In the case of Sri Lanka, these movements are not only a threat to the minorities, but also a challenge to the democratic government and the mainstream Buddhist Sangha. Thus, Buddhist monks, scholars, Sinhalese leaders and politicians requested the government to take action against these movements.
It shows that extremist movements or groups, regardless of religious affiliation, are not of the mainstream of religions. However, 'the minority' will take it as an opportune time to become 'the majority' when their claims are simply ignored without taking care of it properly by mainstream scholars and social activists. Therefore, mainstream scholars, religious leaders and politicians have to elaborate pluralistic and moderate values in religions. This article, therefore, examines the moderation in Islam and Buddhism exploring the authenticity of religious extremism in both religions in the interest of promoting mutual trust and cooperation between Muslims and Buddhists.

2. Al-Wasatiyyah: Islamic perspective on moderation

Islamic moderation (al-Wasatiyyah) is an important characteristic of Islam that addresses the issues of human life pertaining to his individual or social roles. It is a way of life that covers all aspects of life. It is not a concept introduced by some philosophers or scholars to face the challenges of modernity; contrarily, it is the revelation from God since the birth of Islam. The holy Quran in the early stage of Islam described the Muslim society as 'moderate community' (Umumatan Wasatan) and expressed that the God wanted to live Muslims in the moderate way. Thus, moderate life is the message of Islam to the world; and the moderate community which is recognized by the God will be a role model to others and witness to them towards the straight path as the Prophet did to his companions. However, Islamic moderation (al-Wasatiyyah) became popular in recent decades due to emergence of extremism within the Muslim community claiming legal ground in the scripture.

The Holy Quran explains the 'moderator' by providing examples from history. It criticized the people, before the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), who were very extreme either in materialism or spiritualism. Thus, it rejected the aspect of extremism among the Jews who sought material pleasure forgetting the spirituality. On the other hand, Islam criticized asceticism among the Christians. By bringing these examples, the Holy Quran guided Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his followers towards the 'moderate path'.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) guided his followers on a moderate way protecting them from extremism and laxity. He warned them about eagerness in optional as well as in compulsions. For example, the love for Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is a condition to the completion of faith (Iman). However, exaggeration in love for him is not permissible and is rejected.

Similarly, it is not permissible in Islam for one to seek closeness to God by excessive worships or ritual practices. Abstaining from permissible things to consume or to enjoy also will not bring someone nearer to God as clearly shown in the famous Hadith 'So whoever turns away from my Sunnah (way) is not from me'.

As said by al-Qaradawi, one who was been promoting Islamic moderation for more than three decades. God wanted the law of equilibrium to operate in the physical universe as well in the human kingdom in order one to with the other in peace and harmony. Thus, he guided the human being towards moderate and straight path through his Prophets and specifically. He expressed his satisfaction on Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his followers as a justly balanced community.

It is for this reason, the Muslim community (Muslim Ummah) strictly practiced moderate life through out history and rejected all manifestations of extremism. The Muslim Ummah, for instance, rejected extremist political groups like Khawarij (the rebels against the acknowledged Islamic government) and religious groups like Muta'azilah (those who withdraw themselves).

Yusuf al-Qaradawi said the moderation refers to several aspects such as justice (al-adl), straightness (al-istiqama), goodness (al-khairiyah), safety (al-amin), strength (al-usswah) and unity (al-wahdah). However, in general it refers to "the Justly-Balanced Way or Equilibrium (al-tawaseet)". Kamal Hassan explains it with two opposites; extremism (fitrat) and laxity (tartuff). According to him, it is a way of life that pave through between two edges of materialism and spiritualism, individualism and collectivism, realism and idealism, permanence and change and etc. However, it is not necessarily in the middle of two opposites always. Rather, it could be in one way sometime as reflected in ethics and virtues like truth or justice. Thus, Umar, in addition to extremism (fitrat) and laxity (tartuff) brings another element namely 'straight path (sirat al-mustaqim)' to explain Islamic moderation (al-Wasatiyyah).

In brief, Islamic Moderation (al-Wasatiyyah) is a way of life that constructs a straight path (sirat al-mustaqim) between two opposites of extremism (fitrat) and laxity (tartuff). God himself explains it by the term 'straight path (sirat al-mustaqim)' referring to the people whom he bestowed his mercy and appreciation as mentioned in the Holy Quran "the path of those on whom you have bestowed your grace."
He also refers to the people who went astray due to their extremest understanding of religion or laxity in the following verse.

"The path of them whom You have bestowed favor, not of those who have evoked [Your] anger or of those who are astray."

The scope of Islamic moderation is not limited to creed and ritual practices or spiritual and social life of an individual rather it is a way of life that covers inter-personal and intra-personal affairs of an individual. Thus, Islamic moderation (al-Wasatiyyah) is not compromising Islamic concepts and thoughts to non-Islamic philosophical and cultural traditions as advocated by some people who attempted to go outside Islam to adopt non-Islamic ideologies that contradict to Islamic beliefs and thoughts. It is a firm stand on straight path without favoring to tautness or slackness in adapting local culture in Islamic thoughts and practices.

3. Majjhima Patipada: Buddhist perspective on moderation

Buddhism explains the middle path ( Majjhima Patipada) pertaining to ultimate goal of life, namely cessation of Dukkha. It is a way of life that avoids extremes of self-mortification and self indulgence. The Buddha explained it in different ways and in different words to different people. Therefore, as mentioned by Walpola Rahula (1974), the whole teachings of the Buddha deals some way or other with this path. However, the essence of his teaching is found in the fourth Noble truth (maggas) in the eighthfold path. Thus, the middle path in this article is highly depends on the explanation of fourth Noble truth (maggas).

The Noble truth magga denotes a way between two opponents; extreme asceticism and self indulgence that lead to end of suffering or to attain Nibbana. The Buddha, after experiencing the two extreme practices prevailed in his time; extreme asceticism and extreme materialism to attain true happiness, discovered the magga. As a prince in the palace, he enjoyed extreme luxurious life as mentioned in the discourse of ‘Delicately Nurtured’ of the Anguttara Nikaya. He said “Monks, I was delicately nurtured, extremely delicately nurtured, delicately nurtured beyond measure... I had three palaces, one for winter, one for summer, and one for the rainy season. In the four months of the rains I was waited on by maidservants, women all of them. I did not come not down from my palace in those months.” However, conceivable material pleasure did not bring happiness to him. Therefore, he left the palace and the luxurious surroundings to be seeking in search of happiness and embraced the middle life. After practicing severe asceticism for several years, he realized that it did not give him happiness. He said “by this racking practice of ascetics I have not attained any super human status, my distinction in knowledge and vision is worthy of the noble ones.

Thus, extreme self-indulgence as a prince in the palace and self-mortification as a hermit in the forest did not lead the Buddha to complete happiness. In search of a way to attain perfect knowledge and happiness, he found the middle path ( Majjhima Patipada). As mentioned in the Dharmasacchakko- sattavata Sutta of the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha said “avoiding both these extremes, the Ta-thagata, the Perfect One, has discovered the Middle Path that gives vision and knowledge, which leads to Calm, Insight, Enlightenment, Nirvanas”. Thus, extreme, in the view of the Buddha, does not give any vision for life. It does not guide the people towards peace, harmony and happiness. Therefore, he rejected both extremes; self mortification and self indulgence.

The middle path ( Majjhima Patipada) is a way of life in between the life of ordinary people who usually indulge in material pleasure and the life of ascetics who involve in self-mortification. It is explained under eight categories or divisions which is generally referred to the Noble Eightfold Path (Arya-Atthangika Magga). This eightfold path constructs a practical way to transform the people from taking extremism; extreme self indulgence or self mortification into middle path that produces well-balanced individual or ideal person endowing with wisdom and love. The transformation process requires three essentials training steps namely: (a) Ethical Conduct or Morality (Sila), (b) Mental Discipline (Samadhi) and (c) Wisdom (Panna). Thus, the middle path in Buddhism is a way of life avoiding extreme of self-indulgence and self mortification. It is a practical mechanism to transform the extremists into well-balanced and peace loving people.

4. Conclusion

From the above discussion on al-Wasatiyyah in Islam and Majjhima Patipada in Buddhism, it is understood that there is no any philospocial or religious ground for the emergence of extremism from the Muslim and Buddhist communities. However, there are such movements that operate in many parts of the world claiming religious sources for their existence. Further, these movements sometime maintain that they are servants of God or protectors of the
In the case of extremism among the Muslims, there are Muslims and non-Muslim scholars and researchers who have studied the reasons for extremism among the Muslims from different perspectives. For instance, Rashid A. Abdullah (2007), Richard Jackson (2006), Mani Sharma (2008), and Ilhan Ilhan (2010) studied extremism and violence among the Muslims. Al-Qaradawi (1991) identified excessive extension of prohibitions; misconceptions or certain Islamic concepts; emphasis on allegorical texts (unclear meaning); leaving the categorical ones (clear meaning); the need to acknowledge and respect specialization or not listening to qualified scholars; lack of insight into history, reality and the Sunan of Allah; two important Sunan (graduation and appointed term curing which it reaches ripeness and maturity); Islam has become a stranger in its homeland where the young generation finds lack of adherence to the teaching of Islamic values; the impediments imposed on Dawa (missionaries) and Du'a (missionaries).

In the case of Buddhist extremism, local and international scholars have discussed the reasons and causes. For instance, H. L. Seneviratne, Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah and Patrick Grant are important figures who studied the causes of Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka. Thus, political interpretation of the texts, misconceptions on certain concepts like Dhamma; listening to unqualified scholars; lack of critical study of history and feeling of insecurity are major reasons for extremism among the Buddhist community.

5. Conclusion

Islam and Buddhism are two major religions that promote moderate way of life. However, there are extremists groups within both communities due to several reasons. In spite of these groups claiming religious grounds for their existence, main stream scholars and religious leaders rejected it and branded them as out-sider to religions. Therefore, religious leaders, educators, scholars, politicians and social activists from both communities have to highlight moderate paths in their religions in order to eliminate extremism. They also need to work for sustainable peace and nation building through dialogue. It is suggested that Muslims have to highlight spiritual aspect of Al-Wasatyah in order to construct intimate relationship with others while the Buddhists need to engage more in social aspect of Majhima Pattpada that construct social well-being.