

Reclaiming the middle way

Special Address by:

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Published in: New Straits Times, 24 November 2015

Source: <http://www.nst.com.my/news/2015/11/113502/reclaiming-middle-way>

Bismillahi Rahmani Rahim. Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh.

Professor Mohammad Hashim Kamali, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

When I first received the invitation, months ago, from Prof Kamali to launch his latest book, not only was I truly humbled by his request, but I also felt honoured — not least because it gives me the opportunity both to show my respect and admiration for the author and also, equally, to underscore the importance of the central message of the book.



I have been for a long time an admirer of Prof Kamali's works and I have followed with great interest his impressive output, with such notable titles as *The Dignity of Man*; *Equity and Fairness in Islam*; *Freedom of Expression in Islam*; *Citizenship and Accountability of Government*; *The Right to Education, Work and Welfare in Islam*; and *War and Peace in Islam*. He is a prolific scholar who has published 30 books, not including this latest one, by Oxford University Press, and he has to his name over 120 academic articles.

Indeed, the importance of Prof Kamali's contribution to the field of Islamic Studies during more than 40 years has been widely recognised by scholars. Many of his books have become standard reference points in the field, especially in the English-speaking world. In fact, his name has almost become synonymous with the science of Usul Fiqh. Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, one of his earliest writings — first published here in Malaysia in the 1980s — is today a classic in the field. I would not be exaggerating if I say that Prof Kamali is the English world's Shaykh Abdul Wahhab Khallaf or Shaykh Wahbah Zuhayli, arguably the most recognisable name for scholarship on Usul Fiqh in the Arab-speaking world today.

Prof Kamali's career has spanned the world, from Afghanistan, where he was born, in Kabul, to the United Kingdom, to Canada, and since 1985, to Malaysia. As Malaysians, we should all be proud of the fact that this illustrious, world-renowned scholar of Islam has chosen to make Malaysia his home. This year turns out to be the 30th anniversary of Prof Kamali's arrival on our shores, back when he started working at the International Islamic University of Malaysia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Through his new book, *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam*, Prof Kamali provides us with his reflections on the concept of the "middle way," or *Wasatiyyah*, in the Islamic tradition; on the ways the idea can be understood, and on its significance. Importantly, as the subtitle indicates, he posits this notion as an essential Quranic principle. What I find particularly attractive about this book is that it is written in a style that both scholars and the general public will find accessible and yet without losing its academic rigour. The book is divided into two parts. The first part is a theoretical analysis in which the idea of *Wasatiyyah* is carefully defined and then its development is traced throughout the course of Muslim history, from the classical period to our own understandings of the "middle way" at the present time. The second part deals primarily with the various practical applications that are related to this key Islamic concept. Relying closely on the scriptural sources of Islam, both the Quran and the Sunnah, as well as utilising the various scholastic traditions in Islam, Shia as well as Sunni, Prof Kamali illustrates where and how we can find the notion of the middle way in our daily lives and shows how our maintaining of the centrality of this Islamic message relies upon a correct understanding and practice of moderation.

Going beyond the pure theory of *Wasatiyyah* in this applied part of the book, Prof Kamali engages in a crucial set of meditations about how our Islamic traditions, when guided by the middle way, go beyond just dealing tolerantly with other religions. Our balanced traditions relate to any number of pressing issues faced by the larger world today; in particular, care for social justice and economic fairness, women's rights, the abused notion of jihad, and even and not least, care for our natural environment.

He illuminates for his readers how the emphasis on keeping to the middle way in the practice of Islam has in fact been the norm rather than the exception among the prominent Muslim theologians, jurists and Sufis throughout our history. In so doing, he provides an important counterbalance to the hysteria felt by non-Muslims, understandably, over Islam today — a moral crisis, if you like, partly instigated by the misappropriation of our faith by a small minority of Muslims like the members of "Daesh", that self-styled "Islamic State" who massacred innocent civilians in the name of jihad last week in Paris and Mali. They have indeed gone astray and are now regrettably very far from the middle way that the weight of Muslim history as well as our scriptures attest to.

Although Prof Kamali, as a Sunni Muslim, has relied primarily upon mainstream Sunni scholarship to understand the scriptural texts of Islam for this book, he has also made the effort to explore Shia scholarship on this important subject — without, I might add, engaging in polemics. In this regard, he shares with us his original inspiration for writing this book, which he found in the advice given by the famous traditional scholar of Sunni Islam from Damascus, Shaykh Abdul Latif Farfur, who died last year, *rahimahullah!* (May Allah have mercy upon him).

Shaykh Farfur wrote:

"At the present time, the Muslim ummah is in need of taking the middle path of moderation more than at any (other) time in its history. For there is no way to its prosperity and survival except through its unity, and there is

no way to achieving unity except through opting for the “middle way” (as an outlook and way of life) in the first place.”

Here, Prof Kamali was moved by Shaykh Farfur’s advice to engage in this intra-faith exploration, and especially because now, at this time, the climate of understanding between the Sunni and Shia followers of Islam has taken a turn for the worse. Yet we are faced with the irony that both sides continually stress the importance of unity; and it is for this very reason that Prof Kamali makes the effort to explore both positions. What he finds is revealing. This is especially so because he shows that the Shia scholarship, in parallel with Sunni scholarship, has actually engaged in a longstanding campaign to moderate religious extremism within their own ranks. As he puts it:

“In as much as Islam stands for moderation, this is also true of both the Sunni and Shia interpretations of Islam. It is important that both sides take cognizance of each other’s viewpoints and concerns and do so in the true spirit of moderation.”

Here, Prof Kamali refers to the need for moderation as we consider diversity from within, the *adab al-ikhtilaf*, a kind of reasoned and reasonable disagreement through which we can agree to disagree; and he refers, likewise, to the need to acknowledge that although we might be right and “the other” wrong, the reverse might also be possible, as, indeed, our own Imam al-Shafi’i (d. 820), the founder of our madhhab (a school of Islamic jurisprudence), famously argued. So, here again our author brings to the fore the realisation that our differences — these divergences among Muslims — are also indirectly promoting moderation, and that, in fact, we could ultimately be “united in diversity.”

In one important chapter of the book, Prof Kamali makes reference to the moderating influence of *Tasawwuf* or Sufism — the sometimes neglected or misunderstood rich spiritual tradition of Islam. Here, he stresses the path of the middle way that is needed to balance spirituality, on the one hand, against dry legalism, on the other. Furthermore, he emphasises how, for example, the Sufis and ulama like the great Imam al-Ghazali (d. 1111) have helped Muslims to reconnect law and ethics, spirituality and legal structures, and have warned against those who practise the Syariah in isolation from its spirit and purpose, the *Maqasid al-Shari’ah*.

Prof Kamali correctly reminds us that: “Sufism accentuates the inner life and spirituality of Islam in contradistinction to its law, *fiqh* and Syariah, which are focused on its externalities and practical manifestations of human behaviour. *Fiqh* and Sufism are both valid manifestations of Islam each in their respective capacities. It would indeed be erroneous to turn to one in total isolation of the other.”

That is why Sufism or *Tasawwuf* is important and is especially relevant for Muslims today. I am always reminded of the advice given by Imam Malik (d. 796), the teacher of our own great teacher, Imam al-Shafi’i. Imam Malik taught Imam al-Shafi’i that: “Whosoever studies *Tasawwuf* but does not study Syariah will be in danger of being a heretic. Whosoever studies Syariah but does not study *Tasawwuf* will be in danger of being corrupted. And, whosoever combines the two, Syariah and *Tasawwuf*, will attain the truth.

” There is no denying that Sufism belongs to the great Islamic tradition and is widespread among Muslims almost everywhere, not least here in our region. We, as Malaysian Muslims, indeed owe a great debt to the Sufis who originally introduced us to Islam by spreading this religion peacefully in the Nusantara many centuries ago.

Interestingly, Sufism is beginning to have a significant following in the West, even among non-Muslims, and this is helping a great deal to reduce the tension over Islam there. The popularity of Sufism is partly a reaction

countering the near-total obsession of some Muslims with ritualism and conformity to the externalities of Islam, often at the expense of its spirituality and ethics. Like Prof Kamali, I believe Sufism today acts as that natural counterbalance whenever we are losing the spirit of Islam, for it naturally helps us to find again our middle way.

In this respect, I am always amazed by the truthfulness of the timeless wisdom of our Prophet, *sallallahu 'alayhi was-salam*, when he said, “The best thing is when we do things in moderation.”

Ladies and gentlemen:

The voice of *Wasatiyyah* in the Quran has also resonated in almost all world religions and moral teachings, such as the Confucian doctrine of Chung Yung among the Chinese. Therefore, no civilisation can lay an exclusive claim to this Quranic notion. The “golden mean” of keeping to the middle way in all things, the *via media* made so famous by Aristotle over 2,000 years ago, is, however, easier said than done. Our own great thinker, Imam al-Ghazali, described best its elusive nature when he said: “The middle way is always either a compromise between two points of view, or something devoid of two extremes.” (And it usually involves struggling on two fronts!)

So, despite its divine blessings and obvious benefits to mankind, the middle way is often neglected, and is elusive and difficult to achieve, whether in our own religious devotions, our personal conduct or even in our public and societal relations. This is where the major challenge lies: in the actual behaviour of ourselves, of our leaders, and of our communities and our nations.

Therefore, I want to end with probably the most famous verse in the Quran that claims the notion of the “middle way” and “moderation” as primarily a moral virtue, relevant not only to the personal conduct of individual citizens, but also to the integrity and self-image of our own Muslim community standing among the communities of nations in this world. Allah *subhanahu wa-ta'ala* says:

“We have made you into a middle-of-the-way nation, *ummatan wasatan*, so that you may bear witness (to the truth) before others and so that the Prophet may bear witness (to it) before you.” !

This Quranic designation of the Muslim community, the *ummah*, as a middle-of-the-way nation, the *ummatan wasatan*, which our *ulama* interpret as a “just or balanced community”, is in fact a reminder to us all to live up to our station, to our *maqam*, as Muslims, to be ambassadors and witnesses unto mankind, in order that our beloved Prophet, *sallallahu 'alayhi was-salam*, may one day bear witness in favour of us in the next life for being the best community God has created — but, ladies and gentlemen, only for our dedication to the promotion of good and the prevention of corruption in human society, and only for our commitment to being friends of this earth and preservers of our land, and only for our implementation of justice therein.

So, ladies and gentlemen, let this reminder from the Quran be a timely rallying call for Muslims all over to reclaim the middle way of Islam, which has been lost amongst some Muslims. Let us rally around Prof Kamali who writes movingly in the heart of his book: “We must, and I repeat, we must, urgently reclaim the centre and the moral high ground that has been usurped from us. We must choose moderation over extremism.

We must choose negotiations over confrontation. We must choose to work together and not against each other. And we must give this effort utmost priority, for time is not on our side.”

As to the gift of time, which is the exclusive province of the True Ruler in the Divine Kingdom, I can only make du‘a and pray that this latest book will not be the last from Prof Kamali — Amin! But, rather I hope that I am right in looking forward to adding Prof Kamali’s next title to the ever-growing shelves in my library.

With both humility and awe, I now launch *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam* by Prof Mohammad Hashim Kamali.

Bismillahi Allahu Akbar !

Thank you.