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REVELATION & SCIENCE

IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Dr. Esam Eltigani Mohamed Ibrahim
Dr. Raudlotul Firdaus Fatah Yasin

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Synopsys

**THE PRINCIPLE OF ISLAMIC MODERATION (WASATIYYAH)
AS EXPOUNDED IN *TAFSIR AL AZHAR***

Nadzrah Ahmad¹, Ahmad Nabil bin Amir²

Abstract

This paper will briefly analyse the fundamental principle of Islamic moderation (*wasatiyyah*) as illustrated in *Tafsir al-Azhar*. It attempts to discuss the ideas of balanced and an ecumenical community par excellence (*ummah wasata*) and the principle of moderate Islam as interpreted and propounded by Hamka (1908-1981) in his *Tafsir*. It will also look into Hamka's other writings such as *Pandangan Hidup Muslim (The Muslim's Perspective)*, *Keadilan Sosial dalam Islam (Social Justice in Islam)* and *Falsafah Hidup (The Philosophy of life)* that further illustrated his understanding of this important idea and its significant implications in Muslim society.

Key words: *Tafsir al-Azhar*, Hamka, Islamic moderation, *wasatiyyah*, balanced community

Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the fundamental ideas and principle of Islamic moderation (*wasatiyyah*) as expounded by Hamka in *Tafsir al-Azhar*. This was illustrated from his interpretation of verse 143, surah al-Baqarah that substantially outlined the principle framework and perspective of balance and moderate Islam (*wasatiyyah*). His interpretation has become the fundamental reference in the practice of moderation in Muslim society and has significant bearing in projecting balance and dynamic approach of Islamic *dakwah* in modern time.

The Concept of Moderation as Defined by Hamka

The principle ideas and underlying themes of moderate Islam was explicated by Hamka in his major works such as *Falsafah Hidup (The Philosophy of life)*, *Pandangan Hidup Muslim (The Muslim's Perspective)* and *Keadilan Sosial dalam Islam (Social Justice in Islam)*. It manifested profound religious and ethical construction of the concept. In *Falsafah Hidup*, he reflected the crucial meaning of the concept based on the Qur'anic ayat and prophetic tradition (pbuh) that set forth its defining principle and worldview. By invoking the principle of justice (*al-'adalah*), he manifested the essence of moderation, and the conceptual construct and ethical framework it projected.

Reflecting on the significant meaning of moderation, he defined it as justice (*al-'adalah*), which is to establish the right upon whom it deserved³. It manifestly imply the justly balance worldview of Islam, that affirm the dictate of moderation, which invoke the path of the middle ground, and imply rejecting the two extremes, of immoderation (*tafrit*), and negligence (*ifrat*).

This is reminiscent of Muhammad Asad's incisive interpretation of verse 143:2, in his monumental work, *The Message of the Qur'an* that explain the important principle of an ecumenical and balance worldview of Islam and its definitive ideal of maintaining unity and equilibrium of the ummah: "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

¹ Department of Qur'an and Sunnah, IIUM.

² Islamic Renaissance Front Malaysia, Pavilion Kuala Lumpur.

³ Hamka (1984). *Falsafah Hidup*. Jakarta: Umminda, 144.

balanced attitude, peculiar to Islam, flows directly from the concept of God's oneness and, hence, of the unity of purpose underlying all His creation"¹.

Reasserting the Qur'ānic principle of moderation and defining its conceptual and philosophical ground, Hamka portrayed the same fundamental ideas as set forth by Muhammad Asad, implying the rejection of two extremes, of excessive indulgent in physical lust and total negligence and absolute renouncing of physical desire. This perspective, reflecting the justly balance world view of life significantly demonstrated the fundamental teaching of Islam and its principle tradition of adhering to the middle way in every matter and not to transgress the bound laid down by God.

Illustrating further the essential framework and idea of *wasatiyyah* as brought out in a conclusive chapter of moderation, Hamka argued that its connotation also imply *istiqamah* (steadfastness), to firmly stand on the right path, not to deviate to base desire and let it going astray². It illustrated the intrinsic paradigm of Islam that stood for moderate way, which aimed to seek happiness in this world and the hereafter.

Portraying the significant and far-reaching implications of this concept, he reminded people of immoderate and excessiveness that lead to perdition, and extremism that cause disintegration in society. Projecting the uncompromising principle of the justly balance imperative, he argued that genuine Muslim stood on middle path in his religion, and recommended the practice of moderation in *ibadah* (worship). Emphasizing on its broad and extensive perspective, he systematically divided the type of moderation in diverse forms, eg. moderation in *niyyah* (intention), thought, feeling, needs, happiness, seeking wealth, fame and position³.

In classical Islamic tradition, the philosophical construct of this idea had been rigorously articulated by scores of Muslim scholars, such as Imam al-Ghazali (d. 1111). He proclaimed that *wast* mean virtue (*fadilah*), set between the two extreme, excess (*ifrat*) and negligence (*tafreet*), that were vices (*radhilatan*). It was the straight path (*sirat al-mustaqim*) which the Qur'ān commanded and dictated as exemplified by the Prophet (saw) and his companions. He further illustrated this point by the allegories of *al-sirat* in the hereafter suspended over hell, where man's ability to cross it was in proportion of his adherence to the mean of balance in this life. His argument is substantiated by philosophical and rational argument, emphasizing that "the ultimate aim in all affairs and character-traits is the mean, since the best in all things is the mean, and both extremes are blameworthy"⁴.

A Brief Account of *Tafsir al-Azhar*

This section will briefly discuss the background of *Tafsir al-Azhar* and its significant method and structure as established by Hamka. A brief outline of the *Tafsir* was set forth in its introduction in *Haluan Tafsir* that introduces his work and method and its outstanding impact that contributed to the emergent of modern and contemporary tafsir in the 20th century.

Tafsir al-Azhar was first published in the periodical *Gema Islam* in 1959 that was compiled from Hamka's lectures in Al-Azhar Mosque in Kebayoran Baru, Jakarta. It was discontinued when in 27 January 1964, Hamka was charged and sentenced to prison for allegedly plotting subversive attempt to topple the democratic government. In his solitary confinement, he completed the largest part of the tafsir, written uninterruptedly until he was released in 21 January 1967.

It was later published in large volumes by local publishers in West Sumatera and Java. The work was highly acclaimed for its authoritative and convincing argument and imperative

¹ Muhammad Asad (1980). *The Message of the Qur'an*. Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 30.

² Hamka. *Falsafah Hidup*, op.cit, 47.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Muhammad Abul Quasem (1978). *The Ethics of Al-Ghazali*. Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 80-85.

method, deriving extensively from classical and modern works of tafsir such as *Tafsir al-Manar*, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, *Tafsir al-Razi*, *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, *Tarjuman al-Mustafid*, *Mahasin al-Ta'wil*, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, *Tafsir al-Maraghi*, *Tafsir al-Jawahir* etc.

It was arguably the leading work of tafsir in Indonesia that exponentially advocated the modern idealism of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida. It undertakes extensive effort to spread their pioneering works on Islamic reform, which had inspired unprecedented reform and revival in the Islamic world. These progressive ideas were substantially projected in *Tafsir al-Manar*, advocating the revival of science and rational spirit and *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in modern time.

The monumental impact of *Tafsir al-Manar* and its extensive influence in the ideal projected in *Tafsir al-Azhar* was proclaimed by Hamka in his introduction to the *Tafsir*: "a very interesting and captivating commentary to set an example for the commentator is *Tafsir al-Manar*, penned by Sayyid Rashid Redha, based on the teachings of his teacher Imam Muhammad Abduh. His *Tafsir*, besides interpreting the science of religion which includes hadith, Islamic jurisprudence and history and etc., also synchronize the verses with the current development of politics and social, corresponding to the time the *Tafsir* was composed"¹.

In his insightful analysis of Hamka's method in interpreting the legal verse and theme of jurisprudence in the Qur'an, Milhan Yusuf illustrated the impact of Abduh's modern ideal in moulding Hamka's ways of interpreting the Qur'an: "having been influence by the Muslim reformist ideas championed by Muhammad 'Abduh and his colleagues, Hamka attempted to disseminate and ameliorate the reform ideas in his country, Indonesia, through the means available to him, that is by preaching and writing"².

This comprehensive work set forth significant method of tafsir based on *al-ra'y* (based on rational judgment) and *al-ma'thur* (based on tradition) with extensive and in-depth commentary of its moral and philosophical ideal, taken on rational ground. It extensively portrayed the social and cultural setting of Indonesia as demonstrated by Wan Sabri in his perceptive analysis of this monumental *Tafsir* that inspired the new wave of Islamic resurgence in Indonesia: "Hamka, who was a reformer, also interpreted verses of the Qur'an in the context of his reform ideas in which bid'ah and superstition were the main targets... In sum, *Tafsir al-Azhar* is an extensive work of Qur'an commentary which covers non-religion subjects as well as religious one. This detailed exposition creates the tendency to overstretch the limits and the obvious meanings of the verses"³.

This suggested that the work, which derived its fundamental ideas from the reformist works had making revolutionary and influential impact in driving the spirit of reform (*islah*) and revival in modern Indonesia as significantly projected in the *Tafsir*. It had restore the dynamism and progressive tradition aspired by the exponents of modern Islam in the time that produce unprecedented works of tafsir in contemporary Indonesia, such as *Tafsir Qur'an Hidjatur Rahman* by Munawar Khalil (1958), *Tafsir al-Furqan* by Ahmad Hasan (1956), *Tafsir al-Qur'an* by Zainuddin Hamidy and Hs. Fachruddin (1959) etc.⁴.

The Principle of Islamic Moderation (Wasatiyyah) In *Tafsir al-Azhar*

¹ Hamka (1967). *Tafsir al-Azhar*. Jakarta: P.T. Pembimbing Masa.

² Milhan Yusuf (1995). "Hamka's Method of Interpreting the Legal Verses of the Qur'an: A Study of his Tafsir Al-Azhar" (Tesis M.A.). Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, 1.

³ Wan Sabri Wan Yusof (1997). "Hamka's "Tafsir Al-Azhar": Qur'anic Exegesis As a Mirror of Social Change" (Tesis PhD). Temple University.

⁴ For further discussion see Howard M. Federspiel (1994). *Popular Indonesian Literature of the Qur'an*. Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, and Anthony H. Johns (1988). "Quranic Exegesis in the Malay World: In Search of a Profile" in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

A significant exposition of the principle of *wasatiyyah* was critically set forth in *Tafsir al-Azhar* in the interpretation of verse 143 surah al-Baqarah, “And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you”¹.

In his profound analysis of the *ayat*, Hamka articulated the principle ground reflecting the intrinsic meaning and origin of the *ayat*. Analyzing the fundamental idea it expounded, he emphasised on previous discussion of the same theme in verse 115, that asserted that whenever you turn there is always the countenance of God “And God’s is the east and the west: whenever you turn, there is God’s countenance. Behold, God is infinite, all-knowing.” Arguing that the fundamental aim of directing the *qiblat* to Makkah is to establish the unity of religion for its adherent, as the turning point for the community subscribing to the same faith, it is instructive therefore that the direction in prayer must be united to avoid chaos and clash. This intrinsically relates to the theme embodied in *ayat* 143, that set forth the principle of integrating the ummah as *ummat wasata* or *ummat Tauhid* in their uncompromising and undiminished faith in God and their turning to the same direction (*qiblat*) in prayer.

In his interpretation of *ummata wasata*, Hamka referred to the balance and straight path of religion they endeavor to establish², in sharp contrast to the extremities of the Jews and Christians, the Jews being engrossed in materialistic and worldly-oriented life, Christians being preoccupied with the monastic life and totally forsake bodily need and desire. In contradiction to this, this *ayat* stressed the critically significance way of *ummat wasata*, the community of the middle way, that balance between their craving for worldly benefit and yearning for spiritual contemplation and fulfillment.

This fundamental teaching was reflected in the divine prescription of *salat*, and *zakat*, that demand both the physical faculties and spiritual consciousness to accomplish it³. And this exposition was clearly illustrated in the *ayat* 9 and 10 of surah 62 that portrayed this balance ideal: “O you who have attained to faith! When the call to prayer is sounded on the day of congregation, hasten to the remembrance of God, and leave all worldly commerce: this is for your own good, if you but knew it. And when the prayer is ended, dispersed freely on earth and seek to obtain [something] of God’s bounty; but remember God often, so that you might attain to a happy state!”

This interpretation, resonated Muhammad Asad’s explanation of this *ayat* that referred to particular theme intended in the passage, of the justly balance imperative, which relates to the ummah risalah and the foundation of the Ka’bah as their *qiblat*, as coherently brought out in the previous verse “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 balanced attitude, peculiar to Islam, flows directly from the concept of God’s oneness and, hence, of the unity of purpose underlying all His creation: and thus, the mention of the “community of the middle way” at this place is a fitting introduction to the theme of the Ka’bah, a symbol of God’s oneness”⁴.

Manifesting the important ground and the fundamental construct of this concept, he argued that the principle dictate and paradigm of *wasatiyyah* was reflected in the life of the

¹ Muhammad Asad (1980). *The Message of the Qur’an*. Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 30.

² Hamka (1982). *Tafsir al-Azhar*. Jakarta: Pustaka Panjimas, 30.

³ Ibid, 332.

⁴ Muhammad Asad, *op.cit*, 30.

ummah that set an exemplar for the mankind, “that your way of life be an example to all mankind, just as the Apostle is an example to you”¹.

It is noteworthy to compare this view with some parallel and coherent ideas as reflected in modern and classical works of tafsir. In interpreting the Qur’ānic prescription of this overriding theme, Professor Muhammad Kamal Hassan set forth in his article, the fundamental essence and attributes of *wasatiyyah* that encompasses three key pillars, (1) justice (2) excellence and goodness (3) balance/moderation, which was derived from the foundation of the Qur’ān and *sunnah* and its premised of *Islam*, *‘ilm* (knowledge) and *taqwa* (compliance to divine guidance)².

Muhammad Asad(d. 1992), in his magnum opus *The Message of the Qur’ān*, argued that *wast* principally signified a balance approach, keeping the middle way between the two extremes, that formulate the Islamic orientation of life, “Lit., “middlemost community” – i.e., a community that keep an equitable balance between extremes and is realistic in its appreciation of 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’ān 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”³.

Al-Tabari (d. 923), in his work, *Jami’ al-Bayan* had extensively discussed the Qur’ānic term *wasat* as set forth in verse 143 of surah al-Baqarah. Tracing its meaning from the rigorously authentic *riwayah* of the Sahabah and Tabi‘in such as Ubayy, Sa‘id ibn Jubayr and Mujahid, who defined it as justice, he concurred with the meaning which imply equitability and fairness, and signify a balance, and just community⁴.

Al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) in *Al-Jami’ li Ahkam al-Qur’ān*(Compendium of Qur’ānic Law)brought out the fiqh (jurisprudence) and legal implication of the *ayat*, and fortified his argument with the Qur’ān and Tradition, and set forth identic perspective in defining the term *wasat* as justice, which referred to an ecumenical community of the ummah entrusted with the divine trust and were truthful to it. Arguing on this, he says: “Our Prophet (saw) and our *ummah* witness that the previous prophets (as) faithfully fulfilled their missions, and our Prophet testifies also that he faithfully accomplished his mission to us”⁵.

Al-Alusi (d. 1812), in his influential work, *Ruh al-Ma‘ani* explained the definitive principle of *wasatiyyah* that “a commitment to *wasatiyyah* is essentially a commitment to justice.” He principally argued that, “to be a witness over other nations does not signify superiority for this *ummah* over other nations who were recipients of divine guidance and prophets that delivered God’s messages to them and advised them”⁶.

Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), in his reputed tafsir, *Fi Zilal al-Qur’ān*, produced detail discussion of this ayat (143:2), widely discussed its significant meaning and implication for Muslim society, and framed a relatively broad perspective of its connotation and practical implication for contemporary time: “The Arabic term *wasat*, used in this verse to describe the global Muslim community, is a vivid epithet which evokes a much wider range of meaning than is given by its literal equivalent of ‘middle’. The term is used here in a very broad sense. Thus, the Muslim community or *Ummah* to use the Qur’ānic term is a middle of-the-road

¹ Ibid.

² Muhammad Haniff Hassan (2014). “*Wasatiyyah* as Explained by Prof. Muhammad Kamal Hassan: Justice, Excellence and Balance.” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, 6 (2), 24-30.

³ Muhammad Asad, *op.cit.*, 30.

⁴ Al-Tabari (1373 H). *Jami’ al-Bayan ‘an Ta’wil Ay al-Qur’an*. Cairo: Matba‘at Mustafa al-Halabi, vol. 2, 2.

⁵ Al-Qurtubi (1964). *Al-Jami’ li Ahkam al-Qur’an*. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah, vol. 3, 383.

⁶ Muhammad Hashim Kamali (2008). “The Middle Grounds of Islamic Civilization: The Qur’anic Principle of *Wasatiyyah*.” *IAISJournal of Civilization Studies*, 1 (1), 10, based on Mahmud b. ‘Abd Allah al-Alusi (1970). *Ruh al-Ma‘ani Fi Tafsir al-Qur’an wa’l Sab‘ al-Mathani*. India: Idarat al-Tiba‘ah al-Mustafa’iyyah, 2:4.

community which stands witness against other nations and communities in the sense that it upholds and defends justice and equality for all people...The Muslim community is balanced in the sense that it is not rigid or dogmatic...It is an open society that welcomes new ideas and learns from the work and experience of other societies, cultures and civilizations. Its main objective is to seek the truth, wherever that may come from and to adopt it with courage and confidence. Balance and moderation are clear in the way Muslim society is run and organised. It is neither a permissive, undisciplined community nor a regimented one run by brute force or rigid rules. It is a society raised on learning, education and rich cultural and social traditions”¹.

With regard to modern work of tafsir, Muhammad Rashid Rida in *Tafsir al-Manar* relates this interpretation of verse 143:2 with verse 213:2 which categorically asserted that God guides whomsoever He wished, implying that this ummah was destined to be a balance nation (*ummatan wasata*) and meant to be guided into the divine way².

In modern time, Shaykh Wahbah al-Zuhayli has set forth an important discussion of this term with brief exposition of its fundamental ideas: “in the common parlance of the people of our time, *wasatiyyah* means moderation and balance (*i’tidal*) in belief, morality and character, in the manner of treating others and in the applied system of socio-political order and governance”³.

These vast works of *tafsir* had succinctly brought significant understanding of the concept of moderation, reflecting their peculiar context and time in defining and interpreting the *ayat*, and manifesting important Qur’anic imperative and its fundamental framework that set forth the justly balance approach and comprehensive principle based on the higher objective of divine law (*maqasid al-shariah*).

Conclusion

This paper had critically examined the ideas and concept of Islamic moderation as manifested in *Tafsir al-Azhar*. The interpretation advanced by Hamka revealed profound ideal of *wasatiyyah*, which has been extensively discussed and significantly brought out in his tafsir. The principle view he propounded was defined by the deep-seated meaning constructed in the Qur’ān that set forth the fundamental principle of *wasatiyyah* and the essential ideal and ingredient of the “civilization of the middle ground.

Hamka’s rational approach in expounding the substantive meaning underlying the essence and spirit of moderation reflected his comprehensive and dynamic views, and manifesting profound understanding of its ethical and philosophical ground. In his interpretations of [2:143], he set forth the principle argument of *wasatiyyah* and its fundamental implication in Muslim society, and outlined certain basic ideal and principle requirement for the realization of a just and balance society.

His interpretation signifies the important ideal set forth in the *ayat*, and the significant essence and foundation of religious moderation as explicated in his *tafsir*. It exponentially project a modern worldview of Islam and dynamic understanding of the concept, reflecting a modern and practical approach coherent with contemporary requirement of Muslim society, in its diverse context, as articulated by Prof. Dr. Mohd Kamal Hassan in his article reasserting the comprehensive nature and implication of this holistic principle showing “that the justly balanced worldview of Islam has wide implications for contemporary Muslim society

¹Sayyid Qutb (n.d.). *In The Shade of the Qur’an*. Trans. ‘Adil Salahi. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, vol. 1, 148-9.

² Muhammad Rashid Rida (n.d.). *Tafsir al-Manar*. Bayrut: Dar al-Ma’rifah.

³Muhammad Hashim Kamali, *op.cit.*, 9, based on Wahbah al-Zuhayli (2006). *Qadaya al-Fiqh wa’l-Fikr al-Mu’asir*. Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 578.

encompassing the Muslims' religiosity, spirituality, intellectuality, outlook, attitudes, behaviour, relationships and activism"¹.

In a broader perspective, this topic, stood out, as it were, to project the religious philosophy and theme of moderation and the principle foundation that forms the dynamic Muslim society and exponentially emphasise on its fundamental essence as "the community of the middle way."

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¹ Mohd Kamal Hassan (2010). *The Concept of Wasatiyyah and the Challenge of Islam Liberal in Indonesia*, in IIUM Research, Innovation & Invention Exhibition (IRIEE 2010), 26-27 Jan, Kuala Lumpur.