

THE HERMENEUTICS OF INTER-FAITH RELATIONS: RETRIEVING MODERATION AND PLURALISM AS UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES IN QUR'ANIC EXEGESES

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the exegeses of two Qur'anic verses: Qur'an 2:143, which describes righteous Muslims as constituting a "middle/moderate community" (*umma wasat*) and Qur'an 5:66, which similarly describes righteous Jews and Christians as constituting a "balanced/moderate community" (*umma muqtasida*). Taken together, these verses clearly suggest that it is subscription to some common standard of righteousness and ethical conduct that determines the salvific nature of a religious community and not the denominational label it chooses to wear. Such a perspective offers the possibility of formulating universal principles of ethical and moral conduct, which may contribute to the formation of a genuinely pluralist global society today. Through a close study of Qur'anic exegeses of these verses from the late first/seventh century to modern times, I retrieve some of the most prevalent Muslim understandings of "moderation" through time and dwell on their contemporary implications.

KEY WORDS: *Islam, moderation, pluralism, inter-faith relations, hermeneutics, Qur'an*

1. Introduction

Muslims through time have been accustomed to regarding themselves as constituting "a middle" or "moderate nation/community" (Ar. *umma wasat*) on the basis of Qur'an 2:143, which applies this designation to them. This designation has been enthusiastically adopted by Muslims both as an indication of divinely conferred distinction upon them and as a divine mandate to avoid extremes in one's beliefs and conduct. What is less well known, however, is that this verse has its parallel in Qur'an 5:66 in which righteous Jews and Christians are also described as constituting a "balanced" or "moderate" community" (Ar. *umma muqtasida*). The Qur'an thus clearly suggests in these two verses that moderation inheres in righteous conduct independent of theological doctrine or denominational affiliation. Such a view transcends sectarianism and paves the way for Muslims to retrieve a divine mandate for religious pluralism from the Qur'anic text and its exegeses.

Several questions undergird this research. How have Muslims through time understood moderation and its implementation in communal life? How did this self-understanding as a middle/moderate community shape individual and collective Muslim identity as well as relationships with non-Muslims? Does the concept of moderation have a bearing on the concept of tolerance, particularly of religious “others”? What are the implications of this historical discourse for inter-faith relations today and for the retrieval of universal principles of just and tolerant conduct in the context of pluralistic societies? In the course of this article, I attempt to answer these questions by looking primarily at a cross-section of Qur’anic exegeses from the earliest period (late first/seventh century) to modern times, which discuss both Qur’an 2:143 and Qur’an 5:66. In this manner, I trace the diachronic understanding of moderation as expressed in the writings of some of the most prominent Muslim exegetes and thinkers, grounded in their specific sociohistorical circumstances. As we will see, this survey reveals that two hermeneutic strands, one exclusivist and the other inclusivist, have vied with one another through time. Recognition of this has potentially important implications for Muslims today on the issue of intra- and inter-communal identity.

2. Premodern Exegeses of Qur’an 2:143

This verse states, “Likewise, we have made you [believers] into a middle community, so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you.” In his very brief commentary on this verse, the late-first/seventh-century exegete Mujahid b. Jabr (d. 104/722) explains a middle community as one that is essentially just (*‘udulan*) and which is entrusted with bearing witness to the truth before the Jewish, Christian, and Magian communities (Mujahid b. Jabr 2005, 21). According to another second/eighth-century exegete, Muqatil b. Sulayman (d. 150/767), Qur’an 2:143 means that the Muslim community “bears witness in justice before the [various] prophets and nations in the hereafter.” The final part of the verse means that “Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is a witness on behalf of his people that he conveyed the message to them” (Muqatil 2002, 1:144–45).

The early-third/ninth-century exegete ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-San‘ani (d. 211/827) relates on the authority of the Successor (from the generation following the Companions of the Prophet) Qatada b. Di‘ama (d. 118/736) that the phrase *umma wasat* means “a just people” (Ar. *‘udulan*), “so that this community may testify before the people that the messengers have reached them, and that the Messenger bears witness for this community that he has conveyed what he was sent with” (‘Abd

al-Razzaq ibn Hammam al-San‘ani 1999, 1:295). Similarly, an early exegetical work attributed to the Companion Ibn ‘Abbas (d. 68/687) (Ibn ‘Abbas 1992, 25)¹ and another to the Successor Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 161/778) glosses *umma wasat* as “a just [community]” (Sufyan al-Thawri 1983, 50).

In the late third/ninth-century to early fourth/tenth century, the celebrated exegete al-Tabari (d. 310/923) indicates a shift in the primary meaning of the term *umma wasat*. Al-Tabari, in contradistinction to his predecessors who understood the moderation of the Muslim community to inhere primarily in its justice, now understands the verse “And thus we made of you a middle community” to indicate first and foremost the favored status of Muslims over other religious communities. He comments that the verse may be interpreted to mean that “we have chosen you [Muslims] and favored you over other religious communities by making you a middle community” (al-Tabari 1997, 2:8).

Al-Tabari then proceeds to explain the term *wasat*, which he says commonly refers in Arabic to the best (*al-khiyar*). Thus, a common Arabic expression states, “Someone is of middle/central rank in his clan,” is intended to underscore the greatly elevated status of that person. Another common signification of *wasat* is “the part which is between two extremes.” Al-Tabari remarks that God chose to describe Muslims as middle because of their moderation in religion (*li-tawassutihim fi ‘l-din*). This is in contrast to Christians who are described as being excessive in their veneration of Christ and in their practice of asceticism on the one hand, and to Jews who are regarded as being too legalistic in their religious practices and prone to rejecting their prophets on the other hand. Unlike both groups, asserts al-Tabari, Muslims are “people of moderation and temperance” in the practice of their religion (1997, 2:8–9).

Al-Tabari does document the common equation of “middle” (*wasat*) with “just” (*‘adl*) by citing several *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), which equate “a middle nation” (*umma wasat*) with “a just people” (*‘udul*), but for him this is a less significant meaning. One *hadith* which he quotes relates that the Muslims have been called a middle nation because “they mediate between the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, and [the rest of] the nations” (al-Tabari 1997, 2:9–10).

The fifth/eleventh-century exegete, ‘Ali b. Ahmad al-Wahidi (d. 468/1076), finds significance in the particle *kadhalika* (“likewise”) at the

¹ The work attributed to Ibn ‘Abbas is titled *Tanwir al-miqbas min tafsir Ibn ‘Abbas*; the extant version has been attributed to Muhammad b. al-Sa‘ib al-Kalbi (d.146/763). For a discussion of this work’s probable authorship, see Andrew Rippin 1994, 38–83 and more recently, Harald Motzki 2006, 147–63.

beginning of Qur'an 2:143. It connects this verse to the preceding one (Qur'an 2:142): "The foolish among the people will ask 'What has turned them from their customary direction of prayer (*qiblatihim*)?' Say, 'To God belongs the East and the West. He guides whomever He wishes to a straight path'" (al-Wahidi 1994, 1:224). In this extended context, comments al-Wahidi, the use of the particle *kadhaliha* in Qur'an 2:143 implies that just as God had chosen Abraham and his sons and conferred upon them the upright, monotheistic creed (*al-hanafiyya al-mustaqima*), likewise, "We have made you a middle nation—that is, just and excellent." The lexicographers argued that since "what is between excessiveness and deficiency (*al-ghuluw wa-l-taqsir*)" is better than these two extremes, then "middleness" (*al-wasat*) and "moderate" (*al-awsat*) expresses "all that is the best." Thus the phrase *awsatuhum* as occurs in another verse (Qur'an 68:28), has been glossed by the exegetes as "the best of them" and "the most just among them" (al-Wahidi 1994, 1:224–25). The term *wasat*, according to al-Wahidi, therefore embodies equally the attributes of justness and excellence. This interpretation harmonizes the pre- and post-Tabari primary understandings of this term.

Furthermore, al-Wahidi continues, the Prophet said, "The best of this religion is the middle way [*al-namat al-awsat*]." The community of Muhammad (*ummat Muhammad*) is moderate, he says, because in regard to the rights of the prophets it does not resort to the excesses of the Christians nor does it fall short like the Jews (that is, in regard to the permissibility of their crucifixion or of being killed, respectively) (al-Wahidi 1994, 1:225). As for the reference to being "a witness over people," it contrasts the community of Noah, which on the Day of Judgment will deny having received the divine message, to the community of Muhammad, which will affirm that its prophet had successfully delivered the divine message vouchsafed to him (al-Wahidi 1994, 1:225).

Like most of his predecessors, the sixth/twelfth-century Mu'tazili exegete al-Zamakhshari (d. 538/1143) also glosses *umma wasatan* as a reference to "the best people" (*khiyaran*). He further explains that this kind of excellence is a characteristic of that which is in the middle of something. At the middle point, all are equal—the individual, the collective, the male and the female (al-Zamakhshari 1998, 1:337). Moreover, al-Zamakhshari continues, it is said that "the best or the choicest" (*al-khiyar*) is "the middle, [since] defects attach themselves easily to the extremes." He further equates "the best" with "the balanced" or "the just," because the middle balances the extremes; no part of it is closer than another (al-Zamakhshari 1998, 1:338).

The late-sixth/twelfth-century exegete Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1209) has much to say about the phrase *umma wasat* in his

commentary, which in large part echoes the statements of many of his predecessors. He makes the following five principal points in connection with Qur'an 2:143. First, the fashioning of Muslims as a middle nation indicates God's great bounty toward them. Second, their status as a middle nation is congruent with being divinely guided to the middle of all prayer directions (Mecca). Third, Qur'an 2:130 which states concerning Abraham, "We have chosen him in the world," is to be regarded as parallel to Qur'an 2:143, so that the two juxtaposed together yields the meaning, "Just as we chose him [Abraham] in the world; likewise we have made you a middle/moderate nation." Fourth, God's choosing a *qibla* or prayer direction specifically for Muslims (Qur'an 2:142) means that He selected them for additional virtue and worship, underscoring His great solicitude and kindness for them. Finally, the verse as a whole testifies to the extraordinary favor God displayed toward Muslims in His making of them a middle nation, for only God can exalt or humble whomever He wishes (al-Razi 1999, 2:83–84). Al-Razi goes on to say that there are a variety of opinions regarding the meaning of the term *al-wasat*. One school of thought held that "middle" is equivalent to "just," for which understanding other Qur'anic verses, anecdotes (*khabar*), poetry, authoritative *hadith*, and other reports can be adduced as proof-texts (al-Razi 1999, 2:84).

The seventh/thirteenth-century Andalusian exegete Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Qurtubi (d. 671/1273) comments on Qur'an 2:143 thus: "Just as the Ka'ba is the center of the earth, we have made you a middle nation; that is, we have made you inferior to the prophets but superior to [other] nations" (2001, 2:149). Middle is equal to just/balanced, because the most praiseworthy part of a thing is its middle. He cites a sound *hadith* in which the Prophet glosses "middle" as "just" (2001, 2:149).²

The middle of a valley, al-Qurtubi continues, is its best spot, where water and grass are the most plentiful. Since the middle naturally avoids excess and deficiency, it is praiseworthy as is this community (Muslims). A *hadith* states, "The best of a matter is its middle." 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 40/661), the fourth caliph, is known to have recommended always adopting the middle way, for that is where the mighty and the lowly meet. Furthermore, one who is from the middle of his tribe is from its best part and considered to be a person of note (*ahl al-hasab*) (al-Qurtubi 2001, 2:149–50). Al-Qurtubi derives significance from the continuation of the verse "so that you may be witnesses for the people" as further affirming the essential justness of Muslims as a community (al-Qurtubi 2001, 2:152).

² Al-Qurtubi invokes here the authority of the well-known *hadith* scholar al-Tirmidhi (d. 280/893), who had declared this *hadith* to be both "sound" and "good" (*hasan sahih*).

Another exegete, ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar al-Baydawi (d. ca.710/1310), in the late seventh/thirteenth century, explicates *umma wasat* as a reference to the “best” or “just/balanced community” purified (*muzakkin*) by knowledge and deed. *Wasat* in its basic sense, he says, refers to the middle point of a place and is subsequently used to describe the commendable attribute of moderation. This allows one to avoid the extremes of excess and deficiency (*ifrat wa-tafrit*), so that in one’s practice of generosity one does not lean toward either profligacy or niggardliness or in one’s display of courage avoids both recklessness and cowardliness (al-Baydawi 1988, 1:91).

In his commentary, the well-known late-eighth/fourteenth-century exegete Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373) understands Qur’an 2:143 to mean that God has oriented Muslims toward the prayer direction of Abraham and that He has chosen them to be the best of all nations (*khiyar al-umam*). Furthermore, they will be witnesses for all nations on the Day of Judgment when all the assembled people will acknowledge the virtue of the moderate Muslim community. Ibn Kathir emphasizes that *wasat* refers to “excellence” and “magnanimity” (*al-khiyar wa-’l-ajwad*) and that the “middle” of something refers to its “excellence.” Thus when the Prophet Muhammad is described as “the middle of his people” it refers to his greater nobility of lineage; similarly the middle prayer (in the late afternoon) is the best of all prayers. When God made Muslims a middle community, “He made it distinctive by virtue of its perfect law, the most upright way of life, and the clearest of doctrines.” Here Ibn Kathir references Qur’an 22:78, which states addressing Muslims, “He chose you and did not place any hardship upon you in regard to the practice of your religion, the religion of your father Abraham, and He called you Muslims before. In this [matter] the Messenger is a witness for you and you are witnesses for people” (Ibn Kathir 1990, 1:181).

Ibn Kathir continues by equating, like most of his predecessors, middleness/moderation with justice/temperateness. One aspect of this justice/temperateness is that Muslims will truthfully attest on the Day of Judgment that the divine message as vouchsafed to Muhammad was fully delivered to them, in contradistinction to other religious communities who will deny that the message had been communicated to them by their respective prophets. In this context, Ibn Kathir cites a *hadith* in which the Prophet affirms that on the Day of Resurrection he and his community will be above all other groups of people, each of whom will wish that they were part of the Muslim community. “There has not been a prophet,” the *hadith* continues, “whose people repudiated him, whereas we bear witness that he [Muhammad] has conveyed the message of his Lord, the Exalted and Mighty” (Ibn Kathir 1990, 1:181). With the citation of this *hadith* as a proof-text, Ibn Kathir wishes to

more firmly anchor the idea of *umma wasat* as God's select community which, in comparison with earlier religious communities, has alone met the litmus test of righteousness and truthfulness that define "moderation."

3. Modern Exegeses

The modern exegete Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1323/1905), the famous rector of al-Azhar and reformer of the late thirteenth/nineteenth century, affirms that Muslims constitute a middle nation because they follow God's guidance, since the preceding verse (Qur'an 2:142) states, "He guides whom He wishes to a straight path." He concurs with earlier exegetes that "middle" (*wasat*) as occurs in Qur'an 2:143 means "just" and "the best." Anything that goes beyond the golden mean is excessive while that which falls short of it veers toward the other extreme and is deficient. Both extremes represent deviations from the upright way (*al-jadda al-qawima*), and, therefore, are wrong and blameworthy. The "best" (*al-khiyar*) is the middle between two extremes of a matter. 'Abduh maintains that by virtue of being a middle community, the Muslims are just and the best since in their beliefs, character, and deeds they avoid the extremism (*al-ghuluw*) of those who are immoderate in the practice of their religion and the shortcomings of those who are remiss in their religious practices. Before the rise of Islam, people were either focused exclusively on the physical and mechanical observance of religion or were given over totally to asceticism and withdrawal from the world. Islam chooses the mean between these two extremes by acknowledging both the physical and the spiritual aspects of religion (Rida 1999, 2:4-5).³

The South Asian Islamist exegete and leader of the Jama'at-i Islami party, Abul A'la Mawdudi (d. 1399/1979) in his exegetical work *Tafhim al-Qur'an* (Understanding the Qur'an), glosses *umma wasat* as "the community of the middle way," a term whose richness of meaning defies easy translation into another language. The people who are of the community of the middle way are primarily distinguished by their adoption of "the path of justice and equity, of balance and moderation." It is furthermore a community "which occupies a central position among the nations of the world" and which bases its amicable relations with the rest of the world on righteousness and justice and refuses to extend support to wrongdoing and injustice (Mawdudi 1988, 1:121).

³ Our edition of this commentary is titled *Tafsir al-qur'an al-hakim*. It is more commonly known as *Tafsir al-manar* and is attributed to Muhammad 'Abduh, even though his devoted student Rashid Rida was responsible for its final compilation.

Furthermore, this middle community, according to Qur'an 2:143, stands as witness before all humankind. On the Day of Judgment, Mawdudi remarks, the Prophet Muhammad will bear witness that he had successfully communicated to the Muslims the divine message entrusted to him and that he had successfully implemented "the teachings postulating sound beliefs, righteous conduct and a balanced system of life. . . ." His followers in turn will bear witness that they had expended their efforts in communicating to all of humanity the message of Islam through precept and praxis (Mawdudi 1988, 1:121). This particularist understanding on the part of Mawdudi of the designation "middle/moderate community" converts it into a manifesto of social and political activism for Muslims on whom is conferred "the leadership of all mankind." On assuming this mantle of leadership, according to Mawdudi, Muslims must continue to strive to communicate to the rest of the world the divine guidance they had received through Muhammad and live up to the high standards of conduct and responsibility they have been entrusted with by adopting a proactive stance in the world in promoting righteousness and combating injustice (1988, 1:121).

Sayyid Qutb (d. 1386/1966), the fiery Egyptian Islamist activist who was considerably influenced by Mawdudi's thought, is the author of an exegetical work *Fi zilal al-qur'an* (In the Shade of the Qur'an). Although Qutb was not trained in the classical scholarly tradition, his exegesis is influential among many Islamist groups today. On this account, his work is being considered briefly here to give an idea of the kind of potential transformations the term *umma wasat* has undergone in Qutb's treatment of it and his conceptualization of "moderation" from an Islamist perspective.

Qutb begins by saying that according to Qur'an 2:143, the middle or moderate nation is the Muslim community which is a witness (to the truth) before all other peoples, establishes justice and equity (*al-'adl wa-l-qist*) among them, as well as values of balance and moderation. The middle nation/community furthermore arrives at a reliable assessment of the other nations and is able to correctly and definitively evaluate their values, perceptions, customs, and characteristics. This does not mean that it absorbs such values from other people. Rather, since it is a witness before others, it wisely and fairly judges among the rest of the people. In this manner, asserts Qutb, does the self-definition of the Muslim community become articulated and its role made transparently evident so that one may fully appreciate its greatness (*dakhamatiha*) and the special function it is called upon to discharge (2001, 1:130–31). Qutb's exegesis is highly reminiscent of Mawdudi's perspective on the function of the community of the middle way.

Interestingly, *umma wasat* is also a geographic and an imagined cosmic site for Qutb. He locates the “middle nation” in “the navel of the earth” (*surrat al-ard*) and at the center of its terrain. The Islamic realms of his day, he asserts, literally occupy a central site on earth “between east and west, north and south.” From this central vantage point, it can be viewed by all other nations and it can stand as a witness before all other nations, offering to the entire world the fruits of the natural world, of the spirit, and of the mind. In this activity, it mediates between its material and ideational essence (Qutb 2001, 1:130–31).

Finally, the middle community is a temporal, even eschatological, entity in Qutb’s conceptualization—which “has ended the previous era of humanity’s infancy, and oversees the subsequent age of intellectual maturity.” It stands in the center, he continues lyrically, “shaking off what clings to humanity of superstition and legends from its stage of infancy,” protecting it from anarchy through mature reasoning. It couples the spiritual legacy inherited from the age of the prophets with its continuously expanding intellectual resources, which allows it to proceed on the straight path of moderation (Qutb 2001, 1:131–32). Qutb, therefore, expands further on Mawdudi’s rather inchoate notion of the Muslim community occupying a central position among nations and imputes greater political and cosmic significance to it.

4. Premodern Exegeses of Qur’an 5:66

This verse reads as follows:

If they [The People of the Book] had upheld the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have been given abundance from above and from below; some of them constitute a balanced/moderate community, but many of them are prone to wrong-doing.

The literal meaning of the Qur’anic term *umma muqtasida* used to describe a righteous contingent from among the People of the Book is a “balanced” or “moderate community/nation.” In his commentary on this term, the second/eighth-century exegete Muqatil b. Sulayman says it refers to “a group [*asaba*] of believers from among the people of the Torah and the Gospel who are just [*adila*] in their speech.” Among this group of Jews were ‘Abd Allah b. Salam and his companions, while the Christians “who had adhered to the religion of Jesus, the son of Mary, peace and blessings be upon him” were comprised of thirty-two men. Since ‘Abd Allah b. Salam had converted to Islam and the unnamed Christians are described as having adhered to Christianity in the past tense, Muqatil clearly restricts the application of the term *umma*

muqtasida to specific Jews and Christians who had responded positively to the prophetic mission of Muhammad and embraced Islam (2002, 1:49).

In the previously mentioned Qur'an commentary known as *Tanwir al-miqbas*, *umma muqtasida* is glossed as referring to a just and upright group from among the People of the Book. This group included 'Abd Allah b. Salam and his companions; Buhayra the monk and his companions; the Negus, the king of Abyssinia; and Salman al-Farisi and his companions (Ibn 'Abbas 1992, 128). In comparison with the list of moderate Jews and Christians provided by Muqatil, this list includes Buhayra and the Negus, who are not generally known to have converted to Islam (although some have averred that the Negus had secretly accepted Islam).⁴ In this possibly quite early exegesis (if its attribution to Ibn 'Abbas is accepted), *umma muqtasida* includes Christians who are popularly known to have been exceptionally well disposed toward Islam. Some of these Christians had actively aided Muslims in their time of dire need, as did the Negus of Abyssinia, and who recognized their scriptural kinship to Muslims without converting to Islam, like Buhayra the monk.

When we turn to al-Tabari's commentary, we find an interesting and significant collection of exegetical remarks attributed to early commentators from the first and second centuries of Islam, which allow us to recreate a historically shifting trajectory of meanings ascribed to the term *umma muqtasida*. A Successor report (going back to a second-generation Muslim, not to the Prophet himself) is from Qatada who explains "a moderate community" as referring to those from among the People of the Book who "abide by His book and His command," while the rest who do not are criticized in the Qur'an for their wrongdoing. The early-second/eighth-century exegete al-Suddi (d. 128/745) is quoted by al-Tabari as equating "a moderate community" with "a believing (*mu'mina*) community." Ibn Zayd (d. 182/798),⁵ another early authority, says that *umma muqtasida* referred to people who were known for their obedience to God (*ahl ta'at allah*), "and these are the People of the Book" (al-Tabari 1997, 4:645–46). Finally, the Successor al-Rabi' b. Anas (d. 139/756)⁶ is cited as saying that *umma muqtasida* referred broadly to "those who are neither harsh nor excessive in their religion"

⁴ Refer to note 8 below.

⁵ This is the Successor 'Abd al-Rahman b. Zayd b. Aslam al-'Adawi al-Madani, son of the well-known Companion Zayd b. Aslam, from whom the former transmitted *hadiths*. Ibn Zayd was known to have a Qur'an commentary, which was used by al-Tabari; see Sezgin 1967, 1:38.

⁶ Al-Rabi' b. Anas al-Bakri al-Basri al-Khurasani transmitted from Anas b. Malik, Abu 'l-'Aliya, and al-Hasan al-Basri, and composed a Qur'an commentary used by al-Tabari; see Sezgin 1967, 1:34.

(al-Tabari 1997, 4:645–46). These specific glosses going back to early authorities, as recorded by al-Tabari, recognize and praise moderation among observant Jews and Christians who are faithful to their own scripture and laws and who are thus obedient to God. Furthermore, these moderate scriptuaries are distinguished by their temperateness and gentleness in the practice of their religion, as emphasized by al-Rabi‘ b. Anas.

Al-Tabari himself, however, in the late third/ninth century, understands the term *umma muqtasida* in a more confessional vein. He glosses this phrase as a reference to those People of the Book who are “moderate in their speech regarding Jesus, son of Mary, speaking the truth about him that he is the Messenger of God and His word which He cast into Mary and a spirit from Him”—not exceeding the bounds of moderation by saying that he was divine nor being remiss in saying that he lacked divine guidance. The rest of the Jews and Christians, and they are in the majority, err in not believing in the prophetic mission of Muhammad. In the case of Christians, the error lies in claiming that the Messiah was the son of God, and in the case of Jews, it lies in rejecting both Jesus and Muhammad (al-Tabari 1997, 4:645–46).

As is his custom, al-Tabari provides attestations for these exegetical understandings. Thus, according to one chain of transmission, the late-first/seventh-century exegete Mujahid is quoted as defining the *umma muqtasida* as “those who had submitted (*muslima*) from among the People of the Book.” Submission, however, need not mean here specifically accepting Islam as one’s religion, as becomes evident from another quote attributed to Mujahid. In this quote, Mujahid explains the context of this verse:

The tribes of Israel broke up into factions, so that one faction said that Jesus was the son of God; another faction said that he is God; while yet another faction said that he is the servant of God and His spirit. This [the last group] was the moderate faction, which submitted [*muslima*] from among the People of the Book [al-Tabari 1997, 4:646].

Mujahid’s exegesis points to Christological debates among early Christian groups and clearly expresses a preference for the faction, regarded as moderate, which expressed views closest to the Muslim understanding of Jesus’s nature and mission. “Submission” in connection with this moderate contingent appears not to connote formal embrace of Islam but rather submission to or belief in “correct” doctrine regarding Jesus’s prophethood, while apparently remaining, at least from the Muslim point of view, recognizably Christian.

In the fifth/eleventh century, al-Wahidi glosses *umma muqtasida* as a “believing” (*mu’mina*) community, which is temperate and just (*al-*

'*adila*) without being excessive or deficient. He defines *al-iqtisad*, the noun cognate with the adjective *muqtasida*, as "temperateness" or "moderation" in one's actions without resorting to extremism or falling short of the ideal (*min ghayr ghuluw wa-la taqsir*) (al-Wahidi 1994, 2:208).

Our sixth/twelfth-century exegete al-Zamakhshari also dwells very briefly on *umma muqtasida* and explains it as referring to "the believing contingent" from among the People of the Book, such as 'Abd Allah b. Salam and his companions (*ashabihi*) and forty-eight Christians, who are not named (1998, 2:269). We know, however, from other sources that these forty-eight Christians were from Najran who "used to follow the religion of Jesus, upon him be peace, and then became Muslims" (al-Razi 1999, 3:474).⁷ In al-Zamakhshari's understanding, therefore, these believers from among the scripturaries are former Jews and Christians who had formally embraced Islam.

In his exegesis of Qur'an 5:66, al-Razi, like al-Wahidi, glosses *al-iqtisad* as moderation or measuredness/balance (*al-ittidal*) in one's deeds and thus the avoidance of both excess (*ghuluw*) and deficiency (*taqsir*). As regards the term *al-umma al-muqtasida*, al-Razi points to two schools of thought on this issue. One of them regards only those who believed from among the People of the Book, that is, those who had embraced Islam, such as 'Abd Allah b. Salam from among the Jews and the Negus⁸ from among the Christians, as belonging to the *umma muqtasida*. The other school, however, was of the opinion that *umma muqtasida* referred to practicing Jews and Christians⁹ who are just (*adulan*) and temperate in their religion and are not obdurate nor harsh in their behavior. Al-Razi points out that praise for upright scripturaries is found elsewhere in the Qur'an, as in 3:75, which states, "There are those among the People of the Book who, if you were to give them a coin for safekeeping, they would return it to you" (al-Razi 1999, 4:399). Jews and Christians, according to this verse, are thus equally capable of being just and honest and such a trustworthy contingent among them also deserves the epithet *al-muqtasida*. Such a righteous group is in contrast to others among the People of the Book, whom the rest of Qur'an 5:66 criticizes, for, al-Razi says, they were harsh and boorish (*al-ajlaf*) in their behavior and not receptive to guidance or righteous speech (1999, 4:399). Although he does not explicitly state his preference, al-Razi appears to favor the second school of thought, which

⁷ Al-Razi comments thus in his exegesis of Qur'an 3:199; see note 10 below.

⁸ Here, the Negus is clearly assumed to have formally accepted Islam.

⁹ al-Razi 1999, 4:399 refers to these Jews and Christians as *al-kuffar min ahl al-kitab*, which in this context is better rendered as "those among the People of the Book who rejected [Islam]." Thus, it may be understood as a factual statement rather than a doctrinal pronouncement on the salvation of Jews and Christians.

subscribed to a positive view of moderate, observant Jews and Christians and reserved criticism for only those among them who expressed ill will and hostility to Muslims.

Our chronologically next commentator, al-Qurtubi, in his brief commentary on the meaning of *al-muqtasida*, echoes the views of many of his predecessors. Like al-Razi, he too identifies two strands of thinking on this issue. One, to which al-Qurtubi himself subscribes, held that this phrase refers to those formerly Jews and Christians who embraced Islam, such as the Negus, Salman al-Farisi, and ‘Abd Allah b. Salam, for “they were temperate (*iqtasadu*) and only said what was appropriate in regard to Jesus and Muhammad, upon them be blessings and peace.” Al-Qurtubi continues that other exegetes, however, have understood this phrase to refer to those among the People of the Book who did not convert to Islam but who, nevertheless, “did not cause any harm nor did they jeer [at Muslims]—and God knows best.” Al-Qurtubi further recognizes the application of the principle of *iqtisad* in the realm of deeds in addition to theological tenets. *Al-iqtisad*, he says, refers to balanced purposefulness (*al-i’tidal*) in one’s actions, since *iqtisad* is derived from *qasad* (purpose) (al-Qurtubi 2001, 6:228).

The late-seventh/thirteenth-century exegete al-Baydawi comments that Qur’an 5:66 refers to what the Torah and the Gospel proclaimed regarding “the description of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, and the fulfilment of the injunctions [contained in these two scriptures].” The verse further requires of the People of the Book that they believe in all the revelations, including the Qur’an. If they had done all this, al-Baydawi continues, they would have been given in abundance “the blessings of the skies and the earth,” and reaped the benefits of the two worlds. The *umma muqtasida* among them refers to a just/balanced contingent among them prone neither to excess nor deficiency, and “they are those who believed in Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him” (al-Baydawi 1988, 1:275). It is noteworthy that unlike al-Razi and al-Qurtubi, al-Baydawi does not mention that there are contesting interpretations of this verse greatly at odds with his own.

In the eighth/fourteenth century, Ibn Kathir explicates *umma muqtasida* by referencing two other verses. The first verse (Qur’an 7:159) in relation to Jews states, “From among the community of Moses is a contingent [*umma*] which guides to the truth and thereby establishes justice.” The second verse (Qur’an 57:27) in relation to Christians (“the followers of Jesus”) runs, “We give those who believe among them their reward.” Thus, Ibn Kathir continues, God has made moderation (*al-iqtisad*) the highest moral rank among the People of the Book (*‘la maqamatihim*) who are equivalent to the moderate practitioners within the Muslim community. Above this moderate status, however, is a more elevated status, which he describes as “the rank of

those who precede" (*rutbat al-sabiqin*). He bases this understanding on Qur'an 35:32, which states,

Then we conferred the Book on those whom we chose among our servants; among them are those who do wrong to themselves and among them are those who are moderate [*muqtasid*] and among them are those who precede in good deeds [*sabiq bi-l-khayrat*] with God's permission. That is the great virtue and they will enter the gardens of Eden.

These three groups from within the Muslim community will all enter heaven [1990, 2:73].

Ibn Kathir then refers to a well-known and frequently transmitted *hadith* according to which over time, Jewish and Christian communities will split into seventy-one and seventy-two factions, respectively, while the Muslim community will splinter into seventy-three. Only one faction from each of these communities will enter heaven while the rest are consigned to the Fire. The saved Muslim contingent, according to Ibn Kathir, will, however, be superior (*ta'lu*) to the two saved contingents from among the People of the Book (1990, 2:73). Ibn Kathir therefore clearly recognizes moral excellence in the righteous, moderate members of the Jewish and Christian communities who constitute a salvific contingent within them. But at the same time, on the basis of his understanding of Qur'an 35:32, these righteous scripturaries cannot rise to a higher level of moral excellence attained by a contingent of Muslims who precede even other Muslims by virtue of their singularly superior deeds.

5. Modern Exegeses of Qur'an 5:66

Among modern exegetes, Muhammad 'Abduh echoes many of his premodern predecessors in his explanation of *umma muqtasida*. He says that the phrase refers to a "contingent of people who are moderate and upright in matters of religion" (*jama'a mu'tadila fi amr al-din*), who are neither extreme nor deficient in the practice of their faith. Some believed that this moderate contingent referred to upright (*adul*) Jews and Christians while others thought that it referred to those from among the People of the Book who had embraced Islam (*aslamu*). 'Abduh comments that no community or nation has ever lacked a righteous contingent of people who strive to better and elevate their community. Nations are headed for disaster on account of the larger numbers of people who resort to wrong-doing, wreaking havoc on earth, and on account of the fewer numbers of those who do good (Rida 1999, 6:381). This view is consistent with Ibn Kathir's views mentioned above, according to which each Abrahamic community contains a saved contingent constituted by a righteous minority.

From among this contingent of upright people from various communities who hasten to do good and effect reform, continues ‘Abduh, arise prophets and sages who revive religion at different times in history. When the Islamic reform was initiated through the speech of the Prophet Muhammad, the upright and moderate contingent from among the People of the Book and others besides them accepted it (*qabbalahu*). They, “along with their Arab brothers,” he says, were thus the revivers of monotheism, virtue, and decency, of the sciences, the arts, and of civilization.” But, asks ‘Abduh, are Muslims today fulfilling this role by returning to the Qur’an and establishing its precepts, by being receptive to wisdom (*hikma*) wherever it may be found, and by supporting reform wherever they may encounter it? Or are they rather following in the footsteps, “inch by inch,” of those who came before them causing corruption on earth, all the while taking pride in their religion, despite the fact that they fail to live up to the precepts of its book and boast of the virtues of their prophet while they abandon his practice and customs (Rida 1999, 6:381)? ‘Abduh thus clearly indicates that Muslims do not earn the designation of “a middle or moderate community” by virtue of being Muslims in name or by cultural ascription: rather, they earn the designation by living up to the moral and ethical standards enjoined by their own scripture. On this basis, ‘Abduh redirects Qur’anic criticism of lax Jews and Christians against the lax Muslims of his time. The irony is not lost on the perceptive reader.

Mawdudi in his exegesis pays scant attention to Qur’an 5:66 and briefly remarks that this verse is to be understood in light of a sermon delivered by Moses, as recorded in the Old Testament, in which he stressed to the Israelites that if they obeyed God, they would reap His bounty, but if they disobeyed Him, they would be subjected to scourges and afflictions (1988, 2:177). Mawdudi clearly missed the significance of the attribute “moderate” (*muqtasida*) as applied by the Qur’an to a righteous contingent of Jews and Christians or had no interest in exploring it.

In his exegesis of Qur’an 5:66, Sayyid Qutb also dwells very briefly on the term *umma muqtasida*, observing that it refers to a minority among the People of the Book “who do not commit excesses against themselves” (*ghayr musrifah ala nafsiha*). However, like Mawdudi, he too shows no further interest in probing the implications of this understanding in relation to the People of the Book and their status vis-à-vis Muslims. Instead, he uses this observation as a point of departure for discoursing at length on “the Islamic way of life” (*al-minhaj al-islami*). According to his conceptualization, “the Islamic way of life” corresponds to the original “way of God” (*minhaj Allah*) or “divine way of life” (*al-minhaj al-ilahi*), which was mandated for all

people. Thus, the majority of the People of the Book went awry because they did not have faith, were not worshipful, and did not establish the way of God. If they had done so, they would have reaped the benefits thereof in this world. The verse thus establishes, Qutb declares, that faith (*al-iman*), God-consciousness (*al-taqwa*), and realization of the way of God during one's mortal existence on earth do not only garner reward in the next world but also in the here and now. There is no separate plan for success in this world as opposed to the next; the two are conjoined (2001, 2:930–31). The Islamic way of life, mandated specifically for Muslims, is predicated on this basic principle. The essential features of this project, which Qutb treats in some detail, are briefly summarized below.

According to Qutb, the Islamic way of life is distinguished for combining the actions of this world with that of the next in perfect harmony and alignment. This world is not disparaged for the sake of the next, nor is the hereafter belittled in order to gain this world; one finds implicit in this characterization a criticism of assumed Christian and Jewish world-views, respectively. The two spheres are, he asserts, not contradictory or interchangeable in the Islamic world-view (*al-tasawwur al-islami*) (Qutb 2001, 2:932). The value of acts of worship within the Islamic way of life is the renewal of one's covenant with God to faithfully observe His complete way ordained for all aspects of life and to undertake all the duties prescribed by this Way which concern every matter. Thus, believers adhere to the Way, for example, in their work, its production, and its distribution as well as in governing people and arbitrating among them in regard to their relationships and their differences. This complete dedication to the Way fosters a sense of being directly helped by God in the performance of one's duties, "which are required for the implementation of this comprehensive and absolute Way, and in order to vanquish the passions of the people, their obstinacy, their debasement, and their whims when they represent an obstacle." Adherence to this Way also results in abundance in this world, as the verse promises (Qutb 2001, 2:932–33).

The broad implication of Sayyid Qutb's exegesis is that God's covenant with His people has been transferred to Muslims from first the Jews and then from the Christians. Because only Muslim believers adhere to the complete Way, they are entitled to the abundance promised previously to the People of the Book (for they alone now fulfill all divine obligations). Qutb's exclusivist views may be regarded as the culmination of the particularist reading of Qur'an 2:143 already articulated by Ibn Kathir in the eighth/fourteenth century, according to which, as we recall, Muslims in comparison with Jews and Christians possess the most perfect of laws and way of life. However, it is important to bear in mind that Ibn Kathir's particularism was

considerably qualified by his belief that a righteous contingent from among all three Abrahamic communities would win their salvation in the next world.

6. Analysis of Exegeses of Qur'an 2:143 and 5:66

As we see from our survey of exegetical literature, moderation as a theological, ethical, and moral concept has been a highly important component in the self-definition of the Muslim individual and community from the very beginning. Decreed by Scripture and enshrined in the praxis of the Prophet and his Companions, moderation, as embedded in the term *wasat* and as the polar opposite of extremism (*ghuluw*), became in many ways the hallmark characteristic of Muslim self-identity, both individually and collectively. Ancillary terms such as *'adl/i'tidal/iqtisad* (justice/temperateness/balance) and *khiyar* (best/most excellent), which became yoked to the notion of moderation and amplified it, are further revealing of self-perceptions of Muslims in the formative period.

With regard to Qur'an 2:143, there is unanimity among premodern and modern exegetes that moderation (*wasat*) implies above all adherence to justice and temperateness (*'adl*). As we observed, our earliest exegetes—Mujahid, Muqatil, and 'Abd al-Razzaq—subscribe to this interpretation. After their time, from al-Tabari onward, premodern exegetes understood *wasat* to be further equivalent to *khiyar* (best), so that the middle community also becomes the best community. Both premodern and modern exegetes emphasize praxis-based standards in addition to doctrinal ones in defining moderation. Thus, it was maintained, Muslims are demonstrably moderate not only because they eschew the extreme beliefs of Jews and Christians regarding the prophethood of Jesus but also because they are neither too ascetic (like the Christians) nor too legalistic (like the Jews) in the practice of their religion.

The notion of the most excellent (*khiyar*) in theological terms ultimately has the effect of drawing sharp confessional boundaries around the concept of moderation. By drawing a parallel between *wasat* and *khiyar*, premodern exegetes after the second/eighth century began to adhere to the theological syllogism that Muslims as the middle community must also be the best community. Middleness or moderation was accordingly construed as the most excellent theological mid-point between immoderate Christian and Jewish doctrines regarding the prophethood of Jesus. Muslims, it was confidently asserted, situate themselves squarely in the middle and avoid the extreme beliefs of these two groups. Moderation invoked as a theological concept in this vein thus encoded to a considerable degree the triumphalism of a

number of premodern Muslim theologians vis-à-vis the People of the Book.

The same exegetes had to take note of Qur'an 5:66, however, which describes a righteous contingent of Christians and Jews as constituting a moderate/balanced nation (*umma muqtasida*). How to reconcile potentially conflicting constructions of moderation and the salvific faith communities signified thereby? The doctrine of supersession (*naskh*) nicely resolved this dilemma for many scholars. Only those Jews and Christians who came to embrace Islam were included by these scholars under the rubric of *umma muqtasida*. This position, as we saw, was typical from the time of al-Tabari onward. More punctilious scholars noted, however, that Qur'an 3:75, for example, praised certain People of the Book as being righteous and honorable in their words and deeds. The conclusion that the attribute of *iqtisad* (moderation, fairness) inhered in these upright Jews and Christians because of their righteous actions and was not contingent on their doctrinal beliefs could logically be reached on the basis of these verses. *Umma muqtasida* just as conceivably, if not with better cause, could thus be understood as a reference to practicing Jews and Christians who were upright and righteous in their conduct. The ecumenical or more inclusivist exegetes, therefore, recognized moderation in all righteous practitioners of the Abrahamic faiths, before and after the advent of historical Islam. These practitioners acknowledged their common spiritual kinship, came to the aid of one another, and were generally gentle and respectful in their mutual interactions, as reported by al-Tabari, al-Razi, and al-Qurtubi, among others. Here we have a premodern Muslim articulation, albeit inchoate, of religious pluralism within an Abrahamic context, according to which the continuing validity of Judaism and Christianity was recognized, particularly on the basis of shared values and praxis. Such inclusive views, attributed to the Companion Ibn 'Abbas from the first/seventh century; the Successors Qatada, al-Rabi' b. Anas, and Ibn Zayd; and the well-known exegete al-Suddi from the second/eighth century, for example, appear to have been more common in the first two centuries of Islam and to have become progressively attenuated in subsequent centuries.¹⁰

¹⁰ See al-Razi 1999, 3:473 where he comments on Qur'an 3:199, which states, "Indeed there are among the People of the Book who believe in God and what has been revealed to you and to them, reverencing God, not selling God's verses for a paltry sum; these are they whose reward is with God; indeed God is swift in recompense." Al-Razi says that according to the Companions Ibn 'Abbas, Jabir, and Qatada, the verse refers to the death of the Negus of Abyssinia and Muhammad's prayer for him. At that, the Hypocrites (Ar. *al-munafiqun*) of Medina are said to have jeered at the Prophet for having "prayed for a Christian he had never seen." This anecdote is, first, revealing of the Prophet's special affection for the Negus on account of the latter's piety and hospitable reception of the

As our survey of exegetical works illustrates, in contrast to such early inclusive views, the supersessionist view became the more prevalent one in the later medieval period. This happened despite the fact that the doctrine of supersession cannot be found explicitly in the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an, rather, regards itself as confirming (*musaddiq*) the previous revelations vouchsafed to the People of the Book (see, for example, 2:41; 2:91; 3:3; 3:50; 5:48; 35:31). The Qur'an also clearly describes believing Jews and Christians as constituting salvific communities whose pious members are assured of divine approbation and reward in the next world, as in the famous verse 2:62: "Those who believe, those who are Jews and Christians and Sabaeans, whoever believes in God and the last day and acts righteously—surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them, neither shall they grieve." Another verse, Qur'an 3:113 reads, "Among the People of the Book there is an upright community [*umma qa'ima*] who recite God's revelations deep at night and prostrate [before Him]." Both these verses are transparent in their positive recognition of righteous Jews and Christians who are prayerful and perform good deeds and who are thereby assured of their well-being in the hereafter. Once again, such transparency, however, did not prevent a number of the later exegetes from understanding these verses in a much more confessional and exclusivist vein.¹¹

As we observed, the supersessionist/exclusivist and irenic/inclusivist schools of thought continued to be both variously questioned and endorsed in the modern period. Thus, in exegesis of Qur'an 2:143, the reformist exegete Muhammad 'Abduh, known for his more pluralist worldview, reverses an almost ubiquitous trend in the premodern period and is more self-critical in the application of the term "middle or moderate community" to Muslims. He does not consider this

early Muslims who took refuge in his land from the persecution of pagan Meccans. Second, it also indicates that harboring affection for those among the People of the Book who show good will and fellowship toward Muslims was a marker of being a sincere Muslim, for contrasted to Muhammad's behavior is the derisory attitude of the insincere or nominal Muslims, the Hypocrites of Medina, toward Christians in this case.

¹¹ See, for example, Ibn Taymiyya n.d., 4:136–38 where he discounts the possibility that Jews and Christians may still hope for salvation on the basis of their religions, despite the occurrence of Qur'anic verses 2:62 and 3:69 which state the opposite, for he maintains that these religions have been corrupted since their formative period. In addition to supersession, other premodern theologians have focused on the alleged corruption (*tahrif*) of Jewish and Christian Scriptures to posit the superiority of Islam. However, this doctrine of *tahrif* is not invoked in the exegetical works that I consulted in regard to Qur'an 2:143 and 5:66, and therefore has not been discussed in this context. For another study of Qur'an 5:66 and the attribute of *iqtisad* among the People of the Book, see McAuliffe 1991, 194–203. McAuliffe reaches conclusions similar to mine but does not, in my opinion, adequately emphasize the chronological transformations that occurred in exegetical understandings of this verse.

designation to be automatically warranted by virtue of being a confessional adherent of Islam. Instead, as we saw, he uniquely levels Qur'anic criticism, previously directed at Jews and Christians who have fallen away from their laws, at Muslims themselves in the modern period who have drifted away from the injunctions of their own faith and fail to live up to them. 'Abduh notably universalizes the attribute of moderation which any individual, regardless of his or her religious affiliation, may earn through one's actions rather than through one's adherence to "correct" religious doctrine.

Sayyid Qutb, for the most part, is at the other end of the theological spectrum from 'Abduh in his exegesis of Qur'an 2:143 and 5:66. However, like 'Abduh and most premodern exegetes, he does emphasize moderation in regard to praxis so that the Muslims as the middle community, unlike Christians and Jews, avoid both asceticism and physical indulgence to excess (*ghuluw*). The middle community is also much more in Qutb's conceptualization. It is furthermore a concrete geographic and cosmic entity, the *ummalos* of the earth, which represents the final, mature stage of human evolution and serves as a beacon to all other nations. Qur'an 5:66 in particular lets him expound his theory of the Islamic way of life, which is all encompassing and is predicated on the intrinsic connection between this world and the next, between faith and reason, the physical and the spiritual. This Way dictates the ordering of every aspect of human life, including political governance, which, as we know from his other writings, was a main concern of Qutb's. Such an understanding derived from 5:66 is uniquely Qutb's and reflects the Islamist's anxiety chafing under political suppression in the twentieth century to posit an alternate utopian world which would empower him and his cohorts, regarded as the only "true" Muslims, in every way and compensate for their current state of political disenfranchisement. In regard to the Muslim community's relations with non-Muslims, Qutb's views clearly signal a revival of the supersessionist/exclusivist school of thought that considered the rise of historical Islam to have effectively ended the validity of the other monotheistic religions. His "Islamic way of life" supplants all other ways of living, including alternate ways of engaging the Islamic tradition current among Muslims themselves. Qutb's supersessionism is, therefore, even more drastic than that of his premodern predecessors because it is directed against not only non-Muslims but "dissident" Muslims as well.

7. Concluding Reflections

The competing supersessionist and ecumenical or irenic readings of Qur'an 2:143 and Qur'an 5:66 highlight for us the highly contingent nature of scriptural interpretation or textual interpretation of any kind.

Textual hermeneutics is contingent to a certain extent on the reader's individual circumstances, including personal, intellectual, and ideological proclivities, as well as the specific social and political circumstances in which the reader is located. These two strains reveal to us the complex ways in which Muslims related to non-Muslims in changing historical and sociopolitical circumstances, the details of which we cannot fully explore at this time. In view of our survey, it is safe to conclude, however, that such trends reveal that sometime after the second/eighth century, the religio-communal consciousness of Muslims *qua* Muslims became more entrenched, and confessional boundaries became more sharply demarcated, particularly in times of sociopolitical turmoil. Early inclusive views of Jews and Christians as recorded in early exegetical works began to be undermined and eroded to a certain extent (but never completely eliminated) in such changing circumstances.

Exclusivist readings of the Qur'an appear to have become predominant particularly during the height of the Mamluk period, as exemplified by Ibn Kathir and al-Baydawi, for example, which allows us to speculate that the fraught sociopolitical conditions in the Islamic world at this time—in the aftermath of the Crusades and the Mongol onslaught—facilitated such illiberal views. The rise of a more trenchant religio-communal consciousness in the face of threats, perceived or otherwise, to a community's well-being often leads to a greater emphasis on distinctive doctrines which set one apart from others, with a corresponding diminished focus on praxis or ethics which may reveal commonalities. The religious historian Alister E. McGrath has remarked that the formulation of doctrine is "linked with the affirmation of the need for certain identity-giving parameters for the community, providing ideological justification for its continued existence" (1990, 11). One may mention in this context the principle of *naskh* or supersession/abrogation that became invoked by jurists and theologians as a legal and hermeneutic stratagem to frequently privilege less-tolerant interpretations of the Qur'an vis-à-vis the People of the Book from after the second century of Islam—an important manifestation of shifting sociological and ideological currents which need to be better studied but are currently beyond the purview of this article.

In the post-September 11th environment, Muslim discourses about internal reform of Islamic societies and thought have focused primarily on moderation, coupled with the concepts of tolerance and pluralism. True moderation, some have argued, must be wedded to tolerance of difference and acceptance of diversity, which contribute to the formation and nurturing of pluralist societies.¹² Modernist and reformist

¹² See, for example, a number of articles in the anthology Kurzman 1998 and Abou el Fadl 2002.

Muslims in general maintain that modern notions of tolerance, respect for religious diversity, and pluralism are already foreshadowed, if not explicitly mandated, in the Qur'an and in the praxis of the early Muslim community, all of which create an ethos of moderation in the Islamic context.¹³ These notions, they insist, need to be restored and foregrounded as central concepts within Islamic societies today, and their ambit expanded through the principled use of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to become congruent with contemporary, more expansive notions of pluralism.

The concept of moderation served Muslims well in the past, allowing them to realize, among other things, toleration of different religious communities in their midst to a considerable extent, according to premodern legal conceptions of faith-based citizenship and social status. In our contemporary period, re-emphasis on what has always been a highly important and traditional value for Muslims has begun to lead to significant amplifications and reformulations of the concept of moderation. Moderation defined primarily as just and temperate behavior in various spheres of life allows its application and endorsement as a universal norm. Invoking universal understandings of what constitutes justice and temperateness—among them, a lack of partisanship in assigning moral value to individual actions regardless of that person's religious affiliation and avoidance of injury to another (a definition, as we observed, that was already current among a number of premodern Muslim authorities)—moderation can be deployed as a universal socioethical organizational principle in pursuit of the common good of humanity.¹⁴

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¹³ For example, Sachedina 2001, *passim*; Ramadan 2004, especially 200–23; Afsaruddin 2007, 389–406; and Asfaruddin 2008, especially 168–95.

¹⁴ Thus, already in the nineteenth century, Muhammad 'Abduh/Rashid Rida would state that on account of the foundational concern of Islam with justice and tolerance, Muslim-majority societies in order to realize the Qur'anic principle of moderation, must enshrine equal rights for all citizens, with no distinction between "the Muslim and non-believer, the pious and the impious, the governing elite and the common people, the rich and the poor" (1999, 10:61).

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