

Book Reviews

Voice of Islamic Moderation from the Malay World

Mohd Kamal Hassan

*Perak, Malaysia: Emerging Markets Innovative
Research, 2011. 358 pages.*

Mohd Kamal Hassan's *Voice of Islamic Moderation from the Malay World* presents a selection of eleven essays written over the past decade in response to the challenges from a globalization steeped in the post-9/11 climate. Intended mainly for a non-Muslim audience, it seeks to represent the voice of Islamic moderation (*al-wasaṭīyah*) from the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Malaysian context. One hopes that discussions on this important character of Islam will provide a collective vision of holistic wellbeing and, at the same time, recognize Malaysia's pluralistic nature. The Islamic perspective on the unifying theme of moderation's universal ethos pervades its three sections – "Promoting the Common Ground amongst Religions and Cultures," "Changing the Muslim Mindset: A Civilizational Approach," and "The Meaning and Implications of Islamic Moderation" – with a focus on the search for its progressive integration into all aspects of life.

The first section opens with an analysis of "The Expanding Spiritual-Moral Role of World Religions in the New Millennium." This chapter raises multiple social, moral, environmental, political, and economic concerns related to pursuing an aggressive economic agenda within the folds of globalization while ignoring religion-based ethics and the human need for a spiritual guiding vision. Under the siege conditions of globalization's "swiftness, totality and irreligious mission" (p. 83), there is an urgent need for world religions to play – as well as be given – a more assertive role in formulating holistic action plans. States are thus urged to allow religious-based ethics and spiritual values to expand into public life, from business to international trade and relations, politics and educational institutions.

Hassan, however, notes that both proponents and opponents of the separation between spiritual values (private) and this-worldly affairs (public) need to fully understand each other's position in order to appreciate the req-

uisite synthesis. Dialogue is therefore needed if the world system is to be infused with the moral-spirituality reflected in the subsequent chapters: “Buddhist Approach to Conflict Resolution,” “A Muslim Malay Attempt at Inter-Religious Understanding and Creating a Caring Ummah,” and “Transforming the Response.” This section concludes by emphasizing religion and spiritual-moral education as key to interreligious, inter-civilizational, as well as intercultural, dialogue. He cites what he considers to be an example of this approach: the National University of Malaysia’s recent establishment of an institute for the study of the Occident, which seeks to understand western intellectual history, civilization, religions, and cultures in terms of their diversity, commonalities, and complexities.

The second section stresses the need for Malaysian Muslims to undergo a paradigm shift in the globalized era. The author not only diagnoses the community’s present negative trait, but also prescribes the mindset necessary to embrace globalization effectively. The traits identified – among them “quality consciousness, to replace quantity orientation and mediocrity culture,” “celebrating the truly great, to replace the cult of hero-worshipping popular entertainment celebrities,” and “obligation to be strong comprehensively, to replace the culture of being contended with mediocre standards or achievements” – are critical. This is especially true among those in positions of authority, as they prevent the common standards of the “mass man” from replacing the true ideals of excellence. It is therefore important that a book discussing moderation in Islam does not become translated into ideas of mediocrity. Further, there is a universal applicability of the traits suggested therein, for competitiveness, global-mindedness, civilizational thinking, quality consciousness, love of knowledge and wisdom, and valuing time are traits valid for any society, not just for Malaysian Muslims. In other words, the necessary mindsets recommended are not specific to the Muslim community.

Chapter 7, “Building Ethical Values and Accountability: Role of Education, Media, and Civil Society,” list an array of social, political, and educational forces in the nation as key institutions in shaping an ethically conscious, socially responsible society. Herein lies, perhaps, the book’s major contribution: its advocacy of the use and value of education to revitalize faith-based ethics. The mushrooming of commercially driven educational institutes and the accelerated diffusion of knowledge do not necessarily result in increased understanding, awareness, or deeper insight. Sensitive to the impending tension between education’s humanistic aims and the increasingly materialistic ethos involved in the ongoing commodification of higher education, Hassan

views that particular sector, which is now part of the global marketplace, as possibly preventing the inculcation of a true knowledge-based economy. As such, he suggests that those ethics specific to the different professions be included in the curriculum or co-curriculum so that graduates can prepare themselves for the possible ethical issues and dilemmas they may encounter in their careers. At the same time, the effectiveness of teaching ethics in the classroom consists of more than just including it in the course's content. For instance, Malaysia's national educational philosophy incorporates the teaching of ethical values in religious and moral education classes and constantly reviews these classes.

The final section, which addresses the main topic at hand, "The Path of Islamic Moderation," begins with a discussion on the term *jihad*. Contrary to its common association with terrorism, the author highlights the term's civilizational meaning: the inner struggle against one's base or evil desires. *Qitāl*, rather than *jihad*, is referred to as a more accurate term for armed struggle against an external enemy or aggressor (if and when it becomes necessary). One of areas highlighted as being in need of urgent reform is Islamic religious education, where the awareness that jihad encompasses "all peaceful efforts and non-violent strivings to promote the wellbeing and progress of the Muslim Ummah or humanity" needs to be inculcated (p. 199). With a heavy focus on the writings of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the concept of Islamic moderation is further analyzed in the hope that it will build a bridge of peaceful co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims. Further, the author lists recommended policies, strategies, and action plans that Muslim countries trying to follow the Islamic path of moderation should implement. The internal reforms required to meet the challenges of poverty, social injustice, corruption, bad governance, and low-quality education are emphasized.

In addition, the Singapore Muslim scholars' stand on Islamic moderation is compared to the Indonesian Liberal Islam Network's stand on liberalism. The author notes how the former group, when it realized that the understanding of Islam's moderation or justly balanced nature was confined to scholars, laid out an action plan to educate and nurture moderation among the general public. The country's Muslim minority is cited as an example of a community that has learned to adjust to the state's secularizing policies and coexist peacefully with its non-Muslim fellow citizens – even when its religious leaders do not agree with some of the current government's perceptions and prescriptions.

Hassan's principle concern is how to best interpret the concept of moderation from an Islamic perspective with respect to the current challenges of globalization. His analysis of Islamic moderation would have been more

grounded had the book further reformulated the relevance of “moderation” in Islam’s doctrines in light of such everyday issues as secularism and irreligion for Malaysian Muslims. Nevertheless, his deliberations on the concept of moderation go beyond the common narrow interpretation and pamphletism of abstract moral values. This is a good move, for the present dichotomous thinking on interpretations of Islam have to move from the primarily abstract realm of spirituality to connect with concrete social problems. The author’s suggestion of reintroducing religion into the public sphere focuses both on the individual and politics, as well as on civil society and media.

Overall, this book establishes a clear relationship between religion and responses to globalization, and that the Muslims’ non-response to globalization is due to the inadequacies of their societies and not to Islam. It therefore provides fresh insight into the otherwise dominant thinking that associates religion, particularly Islam, with degeneracy, underdevelopment, and anti-globalization.

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