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TEACHING ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: MODERATION, EXTREMISM, AND THE PROSPECTS OF RENEWAL

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the teaching of Islamic civilization in the digital age and reflects on the broader intellectual and civilizational challenges facing contemporary Muslim societies. It begins from the observation that Islamic civilization contains deep resources of moderation, including the doctrine of monotheism, the Qur'anic encouragement of knowledge and reflection, and a long historical experience of coexistence with religious, cultural, and sectarian diversity (Al-Alwani, 2009; Al-Tuwaijri, 2010; Khalil & Al-Ruba'i, 2004). At the same time, the study acknowledges that Islamic history, like the history of other civilizations, also includes episodes of extremism, sectarian rigidity, and political interpretations that departed from the ethical ideals of balance and justice (Bayoumi, 1992; Ibn al-Jawzi, 2001; Al-Khawaja, n.d.). The article argues that such manifestations should be understood primarily as historical deviations shaped by political, social, and institutional conditions rather than as accurate expressions of the normative core of Islam (Aweys, 1994; Al-Juwayni, 1981). Against this background, the study explores possible paths toward renewal, including revisiting inherited methodological frameworks, reviving ijihad, strengthening interfaith dialogue in education, engaging more seriously with the social sciences, and reconsidering how Islamic history is narrated and taught (Al-Alwani, 2009; Al-Saffar, 2012; Bennabi, 2002). The central claim is that the future vitality of Islamic civilization may depend on its ability to recover traditions of moderation, rational inquiry, and coexistence while also responding to the realities of the digital age. In educational settings, this requires teaching approaches that cultivate critical thinking, contextual understanding, and responsible engagement with digital content (Farhan et al., n.d.). Such a synthesis may contribute not only to internal intellectual renewal but also to wider conversations about justice, coexistence, and shared human values.

KEYWORDS: Islamic Civilization; Moderation; Extremism; Renewal; Digital Education; Intellectual Reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many Muslim societies today are described through the language of crisis: intellectual stagnation, civilizational decline, scientific weakness, and economic fragility. Whether these diagnoses are fully accurate is open to debate, yet they reflect a real and widespread sense of concern. At the same time, many Muslims remain deeply attached to the ethical, cultural, and intellectual legacy of Islamic civilization. The problem, then, is not necessarily the absence of civilizational resources, but the difficulty of mobilizing those resources in ways that speak persuasively to the present (Bennabi, 2002; Al-Tuwaijri, 2010; Aweys, 1994).

This tension becomes especially visible in the digital age. Islamic civilization contains a rich body of texts and historical experiences that emphasize moderation, reflection, and coexistence. Yet contemporary discourse, particularly in highly mediated digital environments, sometimes associates Islam with extremism, intolerance, or rigidity. These representations are often selective and simplistic, but their circulation has real consequences. They shape public perception, influence educational discourse, and affect how younger generations encounter their own religious and civilizational heritage (Al-Hamamsi, 2017; Al-Rashid, 2016).

This study addresses that tension through three interrelated questions. First, what are the main sources of moderation within Islamic civilization? Second, how should manifestations of extremism be understood from a historical and contemporary perspective? Third, what forms of intellectual and educational renewal may help recover a more balanced understanding of Islamic civilization in the digital age?

The argument developed here is that moderation is not marginal to Islamic civilization; it is one of its central normative and intellectual features. Extremism, by contrast, is better understood as a historical distortion produced by political struggle, social crisis, and selective interpretation. The paper further argues that renewal today requires not only conceptual reflection but also pedagogical reform, especially in the way Islamic civilization is taught in digital contexts (Al-Alwani, 2009; Al-Tuwaijri, 2010; Farhan et al., n.d.).

2. SOURCES OF MODERATION IN ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

2.1. Doctrinal Moderation

A useful point of departure is the doctrinal transformation introduced by Islam. The emergence

of monotheism did not simply replace one set of beliefs with another. It also reoriented the relationship between human beings, the sacred, and the natural world. In Qur'anic language, this transformation is described as a movement from darkness to light: "He brings them out of darkness into the light" (Qur'an 2:257). Another verse refers to the lifting of burdens and shackles: "He relieves them of their burdens and the shackles that were upon them" (Qur'an 7:157).

These formulations suggest more than spiritual change. They imply an ethical and intellectual reordering of human life. Islamic monotheism presented belief in one Creator not merely as inherited custom, but as a conviction linked to reflection, evidence, and moral responsibility. In this sense, doctrinal moderation may be understood as a balance between faith and reason, revelation and thought, devotion and accountability (Al-Alwani, 2009; Al-Tuwaijri, 2010).

This message also carried a universal orientation. Although Islam emerged first in Arabia, it addressed itself to humanity rather than to a single ethnic or tribal group. Such universality widened the horizon of belonging and linked belief to a broader civilizational vision (Khalil & Al-Ruba'i, 2004).

Intellectual Moderation

The intellectual dimension of moderation is equally important. It is often observed that the first revealed command in the Qur'an was "Read," a symbolic opening that foregrounded knowledge, learning, and reflection. Across the Qur'anic text, verbs related to thinking, observing, remembering, and reasoning recur with notable frequency. Intellectual activity was therefore not peripheral to religious life; it formed part of its ethical structure (Al-Alwani, 2009).

For a society with limited formal literacy at the time, this emphasis had transformative implications. Revelation did not merely offer ritual instruction. It also sought to cultivate new habits of thought: contemplation, argument, inquiry, and moral judgment. Over time, these impulses contributed to the development of major scholarly traditions in law, theology, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and mathematics (Khalil & Al-Ruba'i, 2004; Al-Tuwaijri, 2010).

What matters here is not only the quantity of knowledge produced, but the underlying attitude toward inquiry. In many periods of Islamic intellectual history, curiosity and debate were not treated as threats to faith but as legitimate expressions of it. This openness, however unevenly realized, became one of the defining features of the

civilization's moderate ethos (Bennabi, 2002; Al-Alwani, 2009).

2.2. Coexistence with Others

Islamic civilization also developed in contact with diverse religious and cultural communities. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and others often shared the same political and social spaces. The Qur'anic verse, "O mankind, We created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another," has often been interpreted as an affirmation of human diversity and mutual recognition.

Historical experience offers a number of examples of coexistence, especially in parts of the Mediterranean and medieval Iberia. The term *convivencia* is frequently used to describe periods in which Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived in sustained cultural proximity. These societies were not free of conflict, hierarchy, or political tension, but they did produce significant forms of exchange in science, philosophy, trade, and literature (Ibn Jubayr, 1980; Khalil & Al-Ruba'i, 2004).

Legal and social arrangements were also developed to regulate relations between religious communities. These frameworks were historically conditioned and not without limits, yet they demonstrate that managing pluralism was a recurring concern within Islamic civilization rather than an external modern invention (Al-Saffar, 2012).

2.3. Sectarian and Intellectual Diversity

Moderation within Islamic civilization also appears in the long history of internal diversity. Islamic thought did not develop as a single uniform doctrine. It emerged through debate across multiple schools of law, theology, and philosophy. The juristic traditions associated with Abu Hanifa, Malik ibn Anas, al-Shafi'i, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, and Ja'far al-Sadiq illustrate the plurality of legal reasoning within a shared civilizational framework (Khalil & Al-Ruba'i, 2004).

Similarly, theological traditions such as the Ash'ari, Mu'tazili, Maturidi, and Ibadi schools reveal a history of intellectual disagreement that often stimulated rather than weakened scholarly life. Disagreement could be sharp, but it also generated refinement of concepts, methods, and arguments (Al-Alwani, 2009; Aweys, 1994).

This pluralism is important. It shows that difference within Islamic thought was historically negotiated through scholarship, debate, and interpretation. Such traditions of disciplined disagreement form an important part of the

civilizational resources available for renewal today (Al-Tuwaijri, 2010).

3. MANIFESTATIONS OF EXTREMISM IN ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

3.1. Religion and History

A proper understanding of extremism requires distinguishing between religion as a normative framework and history as the record of human action. Religious texts articulate principles and values. Historical actors, however, interpret those principles under conditions shaped by conflict, ambition, fear, and power. Not every historical action taken in the name of religion should therefore be treated as a faithful expression of religious doctrine (Aweys, 1994; Al-Juwayni, 1981).

This distinction is especially necessary in discussions of extremism. Acts of violence, exclusion, or intolerance may draw selectively on religious language, yet their emergence is often inseparable from political struggle and social breakdown. To read history responsibly is to hold together two truths at once: the normative ideals of the religion and the complexity of human behavior (Bennabi, 2002; Aweys, 1994).

3.2. Takfiri Thought and Its Effects

Extremist currents are not unique to the modern period. Historical precedents can be traced to early internal conflicts within the Muslim community, including movements such as the Khawarij, who adopted uncompromising positions on belief and political legitimacy. These precedents remind us that rigidity and exclusion can arise within any religious tradition when moral conviction is detached from balance, learning, and institutional restraint (Ibn al-Jawzi, 2001; Al-Saqar, n.d.; Bayoumi, 1992).

In the modern period, however, the digital environment has intensified the speed and scale of ideological circulation. Online platforms allow fragmented or decontextualized religious messages to travel rapidly across borders. Short-form content, emotional rhetoric, and algorithmic amplification often reward certainty, outrage, and simplification rather than scholarly nuance (Al-Hamamsi, 2017; Al-Rashid, 2016).

These technologies do not create extremism on their own, but they can magnify interpretations that were once marginal. They also weaken older structures of authority by making isolated interpretation easier and more visible. For this reason, any contemporary discussion of moderation must also address the media environments through which religious discourse is now consumed (Al-

Khawaja, n.d.; Al-Rashid, 2016).

3.3. Imperial Jurisprudence and Historical Context

Another issue concerns the historical relationship between jurisprudence and political power. For long periods, Muslim societies were governed through imperial and dynastic systems rather than modern constitutional states. Legal reasoning often developed in response to the administrative and political needs of those systems. Questions of governance, taxation, war, territory, and authority were interpreted within specific historical settings (Al-Juwayni, 1981; Aweys, 1994).

This does not invalidate the juristic tradition, but it does mean that parts of it cannot be understood apart from their political context. Contemporary readers who treat all inherited formulations as timeless may overlook the extent to which legal reasoning responded to conditions very different from those of the present (Al-Alwani, 2009; Al-Juwayni, 1981).

In this respect, calls for renewal are not calls for rupture. They are calls for historically informed interpretation. Renewal requires recognizing both the value of inherited scholarship and the need to distinguish ethical principles from context-bound applications (Al-Alwani, 2009; Bennabi, 2002).

3.4. Toward a New Renewal of Islamic Civilization

3.4.1. Reformulating Intellectual Methodologies

Any serious renewal must begin with methodology. The question is not whether the tradition should be preserved or abandoned, but how it should be read, interpreted, and extended under present conditions. This requires respect for the achievements of earlier scholarship, coupled with a willingness to revisit inherited assumptions where necessary (Al-Alwani, 2009; Al-Tuwaijri, 2010).

Without methodological clarity, calls for renewal become vague. They risk collapsing either into rigid traditionalism or into superficial modernism detached from the internal logic of the tradition itself. A credible reform project must therefore combine fidelity to core principles with openness to rethinking inherited forms of analysis (Bennabi, 2002; Aweys, 1994).

3.4.2. Reviving Ijtihad

The tradition of ijtihad remains central to this task. Historically, scholars used independent reasoning to interpret religious principles in relation to changing

social realities. Contemporary life presents questions that earlier jurists could not have anticipated fully: digital communication, artificial intelligence, global markets, mass migration, biotechnology, and new forms of governance (Al-Alwani, 2009).

Reviving ijtihad does not mean encouraging unrestrained individual opinion. It means renewing disciplined scholarly reasoning capable of addressing new realities without severing ties to the ethical and intellectual foundations of Islam. Such renewal is likely to require collective, interdisciplinary, and institutionally grounded forms of interpretation (Al-Tuwaijri, 2010; Al-Alwani, 2009).

3.5. Interfaith Dialogue in Education

Educational institutions also have a major role to play. Interfaith dialogue, when integrated thoughtfully into educational settings, can strengthen mutual understanding and reduce defensive or exclusionary modes of thinking. Such dialogue is not a substitute for religious commitment. Rather, it can deepen students' understanding of both their own tradition and the traditions of others (Al-Saffar, 2012).

In the context of teaching Islamic civilization, dialogue helps students appreciate the historical reality of coexistence and exchange. It also counters the false assumption that civilizational confidence requires isolation from difference (Al-Saffar, 2012; Ibn Jubayr, 1980).

4. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Modern social sciences provide analytical tools that can enrich contemporary Islamic thought. Sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, and political science help explain how institutions function, how identities form, and how social tensions emerge. These disciplines do not replace religious scholarship, but they can illuminate the conditions under which religious discourse is interpreted and lived (Bennabi, 2002; Al-Alwani, 2009).

Engagement with the social sciences is especially important in the digital age, where social behavior, group dynamics, media influence, and identity formation all shape the reception of religious messages (Farhan et al., n.d.).

4.1. Reframing the Narrative of Islamic Civilization

Renewal also depends on how Islamic civilization is narrated. Historical memory matters. If the

civilization is taught primarily through conflict, decline, or polemical opposition, then younger generations may inherit a defensive and impoverished understanding of their own past. A more balanced narrative should include not only dynastic politics and military struggles, but also scientific development, artistic creativity, legal thought, ethical reflection, and cross-cultural exchange (Khalil & Al-Ruba'i, 2004; Bennabi, 2002).

Such reframing does not romanticize history. It restores proportion. It allows the civilizational record to appear in its full complexity rather than through the narrow lens of crisis alone (Al-Tuwaijri, 2010).

4.2. Reconsidering Governance and Citizenship

Modern concepts such as citizenship, constitutional order, civil rights, and public participation raise new questions for Islamic political thought. These concepts cannot simply be imported without reflection, nor can they be dismissed on the grounds that they are modern. They require sustained ethical and legal engagement (Al-Juwayni, 1981; Al-Alwani, 2009).

This remains an open area of scholarly debate, but it is one that any project of renewal must confront. A living civilization must be able to think seriously about institutions as well as ideals (Aweys, 1994; Bennabi, 2002).

4.3. Practical Implications for Teaching Islamic Civilization in the Digital Age

The discussion has several implications for educators, curriculum designers, and institutions concerned with teaching Islamic civilization today (Farhan et al., n.d.).

First, teaching should move beyond the mere transmission of facts and dates. Students should be trained to read historical and religious material critically, to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, and to recognize the difference between scholarly interpretation and emotionally charged digital content (Farhan et al., n.d.; Al-Hamamsi, 2017).

Second, educators should place greater emphasis on context. Discussions of moderation, extremism, law, theology, and political authority should be situated historically so that students do not treat all inherited positions as identical, timeless, or equally applicable to current realities (Aweys, 1994; Al-Juwayni, 1981).

Third, digital literacy should be integrated into the teaching of Islamic civilization. Students need practical tools for evaluating online content, identifying decontextualized quotations, recognizing

algorithmic amplification, and questioning simplified or sensationalist narratives that circulate on social media platforms (Al-Rashid, 2016; Al-Khawaja, n.d.).

Fourth, pedagogical strategies such as comparative reading, guided discussion, reflective writing, and source-verification exercises can help students engage Islamic civilization as an interpretive and intellectual tradition rather than as a fixed ideological package. These approaches are particularly important in digital environments, where speed and emotional intensity often displace reflection (Farhan et al., n.d.).

Finally, teaching should recover the plurality of Islamic intellectual history. Presenting students with the diversity of legal, theological, and philosophical traditions within Islam may help inoculate them against exclusivist thinking and expose them to richer models of disagreement, coexistence, and inquiry (Khalil & Al-Ruba'i, 2004; Al-Alwani, 2009).

In this sense, moderation should not be taught merely as a moral slogan. It should be taught as an intellectual discipline shaped by evidence, interpretation, ethical responsibility, and awareness of historical complexity (Al-Tuwaijri, 2010; Farhan et al., n.d.).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has argued that Islamic civilization contains enduring resources of moderation, rational reflection, and coexistence. These resources are visible in its foundational texts, its intellectual traditions, and many aspects of its historical development (Al-Alwani, 2009; Khalil & Al-Ruba'i, 2004; Al-Tuwaijri, 2010). At the same time, the civilization's history also includes episodes of rigidity, exclusion, and extremism. Such episodes, however, should be understood as historically conditioned deviations rather than as faithful expressions of Islam's ethical core (Bayoumi, 1992; Ibn al-Jawzi, 2001; Al-Saqar, n.d.).

In the digital age, this distinction becomes even more important. The rapid circulation of fragmented, simplified, and emotionally charged content can distort both public understanding and educational practice. For that reason, the renewal of Islamic civilization today is not only a matter of intellectual reform in the abstract. It is also a pedagogical task (Al-Hamamsi, 2017; Al-Rashid, 2016; Farhan et al., n.d.).

Meaningful renewal is likely to depend on revisiting inherited methodologies, reviving disciplined *ijtihad*, engaging constructively with the social sciences, and teaching Islamic civilization in

ways that cultivate historical understanding, critical thinking, and responsible digital awareness. If such efforts succeed, Islamic civilization may continue to draw creatively on its heritage while contributing to

wider conversations about justice, coexistence, and shared human values (Al-Alwani, 2009; Bennabi, 2002; Al-Saffar, 2012).

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