

The Forbiddance and Danger of Extremism¹

The religion of Islam is a religion of moderation between excessiveness and negligence; it is the straight path. And within the book (the Quran) and the *Sunnah* (the prophetic narrations), there are many religious texts that command adherence to this middle path and forbid extremism. These texts either mention extremism explicitly, or often with wordings that indicate its impermissibility such as prohibiting aggression, oppression, extravagance, delving too deep into matters, or harshness. The following are just some examples of such texts.

1. Allah (تعالى) says:

﴿ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ وَلَا تَقُولُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْحَقَّ ﴾

Oh people of the scripture, do not go to extremes in your religion and do not speak except the truth.

[Sūrah al-Nisā', 4:171]

2. And He (تعالى) says:

¹ This is an excerpt from the book "al-Ghuluww" (pp. 15-21) by 'Alī Ibn Yaḥyá al-Ḥaddādī.

﴿ قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ غَيْرَ الْحَقِّ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا أَهْوَاءَ قَوْمٍ قَدْ ضَلُّوا
مِنْ قَبْلُ وَأَضَلُّوا كَثِيرًا وَضَلُّوا عَنْ سَوَاءِ السَّبِيلِ ﴾

**Say: Oh people of the scripture, do not go to extremes in your religion beyond
the truth and do not follow the inclinations of a people who had gone astray
before - they misled many and themselves strayed from the correctness of the
way.**

[Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:77]

In both of these verses there is a forbiddance for the “people of the scripture” – the Jews and Christians – from going to extremes in religion. And every statement in the noble Quran directed towards the people of the scripture also includes this nation (the Muslims) because it is this nation that is the primary recipient and addressee of this book. So when Allah forbids them from going to extremes, we are even more so forbidden to go to extremes.

The people of the scripture had many forms of extremism. From them is going to extremes regarding some of the creation like the Christians did with 'Īsá (Jesus) and his mother when they fell into extremism (by worshipping them) and like the Jews did with 'Uzayr and the calf (when they worshipped them). Also, they went to extremes in matters of self-professing piety like what the Christians did when they invented their priesthood and positions of monks for which Allah never sent down any authority to do so. And there are other forms of extremism they committed.

The prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) informed that this nation will follow the Jews and Christians in their misguided ways step-by-step. He was indicating that this nation would fall into extremism just as they did and this has certainly happened. So the prohibition for them to avoid extremism is for us as well.

3. Allah (تعالى) says:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تُحَرِّمُوا طَيِّبَاتِ مَا أَحَلَّ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ ﴾

Oh you who have believed, do not prohibit the good things that Allah has made lawful to you and do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors.

[Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:87]

4. And He (تعالى) says:

﴿ فَاسْتَقِمْ كَمَا أُمِرْتَ وَمَنْ تَابَ مَعَكَ وَلَا تَطْغَوْا إِنَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴾

So remain on a right course as you have been commanded, (you) and those who have turned back (to Allah) with you, and do not transgress, oppress.

Indeed, He is seeing of what you do.

[Sūrah Hūd, 11:112]

From these last two verses, we see that extremism is forbidden because transgression means to go beyond the set, religiously-legislated limits and this is the very meaning of

extremism. Similarly, oppression is a form of going beyond the permissible limits. So, both verses command moderation, tolerance, and justice and both forbid extremism.

And from the ḥadīth:

1. Abdullāh Ibn ‘Abbās (رضي الله عنه) said: On the day of al-‘Aqabah, the messenger of Allah (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) asked while he was on his mount, “Bring me some stones to clean with.” So I gathered large rocks like those used for stoning. When I placed them in his hand, he said:

بَأَمْثَالِ هَؤُلَاءِ، بِأَمْثَالِ هَؤُلَاءِ، وَإِيَّاكُمْ وَالْغُلُوفِ فِي الدِّينِ، فَإِنَّمَا أَهْلَكَ مَنْ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمْ
الْغُلُوفِ فِي الدِّينِ.

“No, rather like this, like this (describing the appropriate size). Beware of extremism in religion because the only thing that destroyed those before you was extremism in religion.”²

This ḥadīth is one of the most explicit proofs forbidding going to extremes in any religious matter. It might have seemed appropriate for the prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) to simply point at that this impermissibility pertains only to cleaning stones specifically. However, he (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) took the opportunity to speak in general terms, forbidding any type of extremism in any religious matter.

² Recorded by al-Nasāī (Sunan al-Nasāī al-Kubrā, 2/435, no. 4049) and Ibn Mājah (Sunan Ibn Mājah, 2/1008, no. 3029). The actual wording is that of al-Nasāī and the ḥadīth’s chain of narrators is authentic.

Ibn Taymiyyah (رحمه الله) said, “His statement, ‘And beware of extremism in religion’ is comprehensive including all types of extremism whether in beliefs or actions.”³

The prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) explained that the very thing that destroyed the nations before us was religious extremism. From his detailed explanations, he explained that the destruction of Nūḥ’s (Noah’s) people was their going to extremes with regards to past righteous people so much so that they eventually began worshipping them. And the Jews were destroyed because of their extremism regarding ‘Uzayr and the calf (eventually worshipping them), their extremism regarding their neglect and belittling of religion so much so that they killed prophets and changed and distorted religious texts. The reason for the Christians’ destruction was their extremism regarding ‘Īsá, the son of Maryam and his mother (Mary), (eventually worshipping them) and their innovating and fabricating of religious rites and acts of worship for which Allah never authorized. And the reason for the destruction of most of those destroyed from our nation is also extremism: extremism in issues of Allah’s names and characteristics⁴, extremism regarding righteous people, or going to extremes in matters of passing judgment of people, etc. And there are many other ways leading to destruction which originate from extremism: either by excessiveness or negligence (in religion).

2. Abdullāh Ibn Masūd (رضي الله عنه) said: Allah’s messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) repeated three times:

³ Iqtidā al-Širāṭ al-Mustaqīm (1/328).

⁴ Like those sects who go to extremes in confirming Allah’s names and attributes so much so that they describe Allah in terms similar to His creation, or those who go to extremes in so-called praising of Allah in that they completely negate those names and attributes that Allah describes Himself with or His prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) describes Him with.

هَلَكَ الْمُتَنَطِّعُونَ.

The “Mutanaṭṭi’ūn” are destroyed.⁵

And in the ḥadīth’s wording recorded by Abu Dāwūd:

أَلَا هَلَكَ الْمُتَنَطِّعُونَ.

Let it be known, the “Mutanaṭṭi’ūn” are destroyed.⁶

Al-Nawawī explains, “The ‘Mutanaṭṭi’ūn’ are the overly-strict people, those who go too deep (into religious matters), the extremists, those who go beyond the permissible limits in their statements and actions.”⁷

The statement “The ‘Mutanaṭṭi’ūn’ are destroyed,” is exactly like the statement “The only thing that destroyed those before you was extremism in religion” – they are identical in meaning, each confirming and supporting the other.

3. Abū Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) said that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

إِنَّ الدِّينَ يَسْرٌ وَلَنْ يُشَادَّ الدِّينَ أَحَدٌ إِلَّا غَلَبَهُ، فَسَدِّدُوا وَقَارِبُوا وَأَبْشِرُوا وَاسْتَعِينُوا
بِالْغَدْوَةِ وَالرَّوْحَةِ وَشَيْءٍ مِنَ الدُّلْجَةِ.

The religion is indeed easy, and no one contends with the religion except that it will overwhelm him. So seek out a balanced correctness, do as much as you can, and

⁵ Recorded by Muslim (4/2055, no. 2670).

⁶ Sunan Abī Dāwūd (5/193, no. 4600).

⁷ See al-Nawawī’s explanation of Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (16/220).

rejoice (at your reward). And seek assistance (from Allah) in the early morning, the afternoon, and some part of the late night.⁸

4. Abdullāh Ibn ‘Amr (رضي الله عنه) said: I used to be a man who exerted much effort and energy (for worship). My father helped me marry and later visited me. He asked my wife, “What do you think of your husband?” She replied, “He is one of the best men, he neither sleeps much (due to constant prayer), nor does he break his fast much (due to constant fasting).” He then came to me and said, “Your wife is a Muslim woman and you have prevented her from (the benefits of) marriage?!” I did not think much about what he said to me due to my strength and energy (for acts of worship) until it reached Allah’s messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ). He said:

لَكِنِّي أَنَامُ وَأُصَلِّي، وَأَصُومُ وَأُفْطِرُ، فَنِمَ وَصَلَّ، وَأَفْطِرُ، وَصَمَّ مِنْ كُلِّ شَهْرٍ ثَلَاثَةَ
أَيَّامٍ.

As for me, I sleep and I pray. I fast and I break my fast. So sleep and pray, and break your fast some days and just fast three days in every month.

I said, “Oh messenger of Allah, I am stronger than that.” So he said:

فَصُمْ صَوْمَ دَاوُدَ صُمَّ يَوْمًا وَأَفْطِرُ يَوْمًا، وَأَقْرَأُ الْقُرْآنَ فِي كُلِّ شَهْرٍ.

Then fast the fast of Dāwūd: fast one day and do not fast the next day, and read the Quran (finishing it) only once every month.

⁸ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (1/23, no. 39).

I said, "Oh messenger of Allah, I am stronger than that." So he said:

إِقْرَأْهُ فِي خَمْسَ عَشْرَةَ.

(Then) read it every fifteen days.

I again said, "Oh messenger of Allah, I am stronger than that." Ḥuṣayn (one of the ḥadīth narrators) said that Manṣūr narrated from Mujāhid that the prophet eventually went down to seven days, then said:

إِنَّ لِكُلِّ عَمَلٍ شِرَّةً، وَلِكُلِّ شِرَّةٍ فِتْرَةٌ، فَمَنْ كَانَتْ فِتْرَتُهُ إِلَى سُنَّتِي فَقَدْ اهْتَدَى، وَمَنْ كَانَتْ فِتْرَتُهُ إِلَى غَيْرِ ذَلِكَ فَقَدْ هَلَكَ.

Every action requires a certain amount of religious vigor, energy and for every period of vigor (*shirrah*) there is also a time of weakness and inactivity (*fatrah*). So, whoever applies his period of inactivity in accordance with my *sunnah* (religious practice), then he is guided. And whoever applies his inactivity in accordance with anything other than that, he is destroyed.

Abdullāh (Ibn 'Amr) said, "If only I had first accepted the concession of Allah's messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) to perform less, it would have been more beloved to me than to have the equivalent of all my family and wealth. Today, I am an old man, aged and weak, yet I would hate to leave anything that Allah's messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) told me to do."⁹

⁹ Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Khuzaymah (3/293, no. 1105).

In another narration, there is the wording, “So, whoever applies his period of religious vigor in accordance with my sunnah, then he will succeed.”¹⁰

And in another narration:

تِلْكَ ضَرَاوَةٌ الْإِسْلَامِ وَشِرَّتُهُ، وَلِكُلِّ ضَرَاوَةٍ شِرَّةٌ، وَلِكُلِّ شِرَّةٍ فَتْرَةٌ، فَمَنْ كَانَتْ فَتْرَتُهُ
إِلَى اقْتِصَادٍ وَسُنَّةٍ فَلَأُمُّ مَا هُوَ، وَمَنْ كَانَتْ فَتْرَتُهُ إِلَى الْمَعَاصِي فَذَلِكَ الْهَالِكُ.

That is the intensity and vigor of Islam. Every instance of intense worship requires religious vigor and energy, and for every period of vigor (*shirrah*) there is also a time of weakness and inactivity (*fatrah*). So whoever applies his time of religious vigor in accordance to a balanced, organized manner, then that is a great source and way. But whoever applies his religious vigor to sinning, then that is a person destroyed.¹¹

5. Abū Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) said that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

إِنَّ لِهَذَا الْقُرْآنِ شِرَّةً وَلِلنَّاسِ عَنْهُ فَتْرَةٌ، فَمَنْ كَانَتْ فَتْرَتُهُ إِلَى الْقَصْدِ فَنِعْمًا هِيَ،
وَمَنْ كَانَتْ فَتْرَتُهُ إِلَى الْإِعْرَاضِ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْبُورُ.

Indeed this Quran requires a certain amount of religious vigor, energy, and for every person there is also a period of weakness and inactivity. So whoever applies his time of religious inactivity in moderation, then what an excellent way. But whoever's inactivity leads to rejecting and abandoning (deeds), then those are a people

ruined.¹²

¹⁰ Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān (1/187, no. 11).

¹¹ Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (2/165, no. 6539).

¹² Recorded in Sunan al-Tirmithī (no. 2455), Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān (no. 343), and in Musnad Ibn Abī Ya'lá (11/434, no. 6557).

The word *shirrah* used in the ḥadīth above is used to describe the feeling of religious vigor or devotion to something, the energy or desire that could be applied towards doing something good or bad.

The word *fatrah* is used to describe the feeling of inactivity or weakness. So the meaning is that whoever traverses a path of moderation and justice will be safe and successful because perhaps such a person will be constant in doing what little religious actions he has begun. As for he who goes to extremes and is overly zealous in the beginning and then later becomes neglectful, abandoning good deeds or goes beyond the permissible religiously-legislated limits in doing deeds, such a person will be destroyed.

6. Abdullāh Ibn 'Amr Ibn al-Āṣ (رضي الله عنه) said that the messenger of Allah (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

إِنَّ هَذَا الدِّينَ مَتِينٌ، فَأَوْغِلْ فِيهِ بِرِفْقٍ، وَلَا تُبَغِّضْ إِلَى نَفْسِكَ عِبَادَةَ رَبِّكَ، فَإِنَّ
الْمُنْبِتَ لَا سَفْرًا قَطَعَ وَلَا ظَهْرًا أَبْقَى، فَاعْمَلْ عَمَلَ امْرِئٍ يَظُنُّ أَنَّ لَنْ يَمُوتَ أَبَدًا،
وَاحْذِرْ حَذْرًا يَخْشَى أَنْ يَمُوتَ غَدًا.

Indeed, this religion is strong and well-established so enter into it deeply yet do so gently. And do not cause the worship of your Lord to become hateful to you. For the one who traverses it harshly will neither reach (his goal) nor will it spare anyone. So

do actions like a person who thinks he will never die, and be cautious like a person who fears he will die tomorrow.¹³

7. Abū Hurayrah and Ibn ‘Umar (رضي الله عنهما) both narrated that Allah’s messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

يُحْمَلُ هَذَا الْعِلْمُ مِنْ كُلِّ خَلْفٍ عُدُوهُ، يَنْفَوْنَ عَنْهُ تَحْرِيفُ الْغَالِيْنَ، وَانْتِحَالُ
الْمُبْطِلِيْنَ، وَتَأْوِيلُ الْجَاهِلِيْنَ.

This religious knowledge is preserved from every deviated direction: the distortion of the extremists flees from it as does the false assumptions of the deniers and the misinterpretation of the ignorant.¹⁴

8. Abū Umāmah (رضي الله عنه) said that the messenger of Allah (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

صِنْفَانِ مِنْ أُمَّتِي لَنْ تَنَالَهُمَا شَفَاعَتِي: إِمَامٌ ظَلُومٌ وَكُلُّ غَالٍ مَارِقٍ.

There are two groups of people from my nation that will not receive my intercession: an oppressive ruler and every extremist renegade.¹⁵

¹³ Sunan al-Bayhaqī al-Kubrā (3/19). The chain of narrators is weak, however the text, “Indeed, this religion is strong and well-established so enter deeply into yet do so gently” is strong based on other supporting narrations.

¹⁴ Recorded in Sunan al-Bayhaqī (10/209), “Sharaf Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth” by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (p. 29). al-Ḥāfīdh al-‘Alāī declared some of its chains it to be authentic and al-Albānī mentioned al-‘Alāī’s statements in “Mishkāh al-Maṣābīḥ” (1/83, no. 248).

¹⁵ Recorded by al-Ṭabarānī in al-Mu’jam al-Kabīr (8/378, no. 8079) and in al-Mu’jam al-Awṣaṭ (1/200, no. 640) and by al-Albānī in al-Silsilah al-Ṣaḥīḥah (no. 471).