

THE GOLDEN AGE RENEWAL PROJECT

The Bridge of Moderation: A Program to Counter the Intellectual Foundations of Religious Radicalism

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I. Islam was the Pillar of Moderation in its Golden Age

In the Middle Ages, especially between the 9th and 13th centuries, Islamic culture was *the leading culture in the West, on the cutting edge of scientific, mathematical and philosophical learning.*

The Muslims have a glorious history of cultural achievement, dating back to this Golden Age, at which time it was the Islamic world that re-introduced the Greek classics to civilization. It is only through medieval Arabic translations and interpretations of the classic works of ancient Greece (including the seminal works of Plato and Aristotle), that these works became known in the West. Indeed, Islam is a fundamental component of Western cultural and religious development.

It was through the giants of Islamic thought, such as al-Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes, that the intellectual achievements of ancient Greece became known to Christian Europe. Islamic scholarship thus served as the bridge that passed on the intellectual achievements of the classical world to then-contemporary society. Islamic thinkers were the ones who transmitted the Western tradition on to Europe.

The thinking of these masters of Islam's Golden Age was *moderate, rationalist and tolerant*, standing in stark contrast to more recent trends. In that earlier Golden Age, the Islamic world produced some of the greatest philosophers -- moderates and rationalists, who promoted a life of reason and tolerance. The greatest of these masters, al-Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes, embraced many of the classical virtues, such as *moderation*, the great pillar of Western tradition beginning with Aristotle, who promoted the Golden Mean as the key to virtue.

Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas erected a bridge between the classical world and the three great monotheistic religions and societies. That bridge is still there to bring us together, if we allow it to do so. It also provides a linguistic framework -- a common vocabulary -- that can be a beach-head for discussion and dialogue. *This framework forms an interreligious network of common understanding.*

Maimonides, the towering Jewish medieval thinker, soaked up the philosophy of the Islamic masters and created a new synthesis, harmonizing religion and philosophy, which was bequeathed to St. Thomas Aquinas. Thus, all three monotheistic religions are heirs to this grand medieval philosophical tradition, which is a shared philosophical and religious tradition, common to all three great Western religions.

II. Religious Fundamentalism has been spread in recent times through ideas foreign to Islam's Golden Age:

- ***Denial of Human Free Will:*** Concepts of *fatalism and determinism*, that deny human free will, contribute strongly to justifying, *as divinely ordained*, even acts as horrific as suicide bombings. In fact, everything becomes “divinely ordained” and beyond ethical reproach once it is believed that no free human choice is involved in the course of human action.
- ***No Cause & Effect:*** Notions of the supremacy of religious doctrine over rational proof or logical demonstration contribute to a climate of confusion that facilitates extremism. So, for example, scientific principles of causation explain why certain events occur, given other events (such as why a glass drops to the floor once one releases one's grip on it, or why a person driving a car with faulty brakes will quickly become involved in a collision). Religious notions attributing all events to God's inscrutable will to the exclusion of all other factors, conversely, make the world an unintelligible place, where planning and foresight become regarded as unnecessary or even useless. Caution may be thrown to the wind under such a worldview, since all depends ultimately and only upon God's inscrutable will. Therefore the consequences of committing acts of violence may be viewed as irrelevant as well, since all future events will result from God's inscrutable will and nothing else. In a similar vein, compromise, as a method of conflict resolution, would under such a worldview offer little of value. In a world where nothing is gained from mutual respect and recognition of the other's point of view (since future events all result from God's inscrutable will), compromise achieves little. Rather, these religious principles militate against compromise and towards an absolute position, that which is presumably favored by God and which will please Him, and which will, it is presumed, lead to additional favorable future events dictated by His will. Violent confrontation would then seem a preferred course of action over compromise, as violent confrontation holds out the promise of absolute victory for the side performing it, whereas compromise yields complete victory for neither side (which is indeed what makes it appealing in the West).
- ***Extremism versus The Golden Mean:*** Adherents of fanatical ideologies are urged on towards extremism, as opposed to classical notions of striving for moderation or the

Golden Mean (the position midway between two extremes). This juxtaposes Aristotle's classic idea of the ethical Golden Mean versus exhortations to zealotry.

III. The Moderate and Rational views of Islam's Golden Age have Many Examples:

- The inhabitants of al-Farabi's "virtuous city," like all people, possess free will and enjoy freedom of choice in their actions (see *al-Farabi*, al-Madina al-Fadilah)
- It is altogether wrong to believe that all worldly events are the direct result of specific divine decree and intervention, and that people are devoid of any active initiative or any measure of freedom to act as they see fit. Human free will is one of the two complementary components determining human action, the other being God's purview (see *Averroes*, Incoherence of the Incoherence)

- Philosophy and science are pre-eminent in relation to religious principles, and to the extent religious doctrine is further removed from demonstrated principles of philosophy and science, they are further removed from truth. (see *al-Farabi*, Ihsa al-Ulum)
- The Koran itself demands reflection upon nature as the means of arriving at theological truth, and this truth can be derived only by the methods of proof employed in philosophy and science. Also, verses in the Koran that may be interpreted in various ways can be legitimately interpreted only by those expert in philosophy and science. Rejection of the principle of causation (cause and effect / natural causation) is the equivalent of the rejection of all knowledge itself. (see *Averroes*, Incoherence of the Incoherence, citing to the Koran: 2:29, 3:5-7, and 7:14)

- All virtuous actions are such because they are moderate, or midway between two extremes, such as the virtuous character trait of generosity, which is the middle position between the undesirable extremes of being a spendthrift and being miserly. All actions by people should be grounded in reason. (see *al-Farabi*, al-Tanbih ala Sahil al-Sa'adah)
- The intermediate character trait, falling between two extremes, is in each case the praiseworthy one. (see *Averroes*, fourth statement of his middle commentary on Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics])

IV. We should acknowledge the great Islamic heritage of moderation and tolerance in our dialogue and interactions. When people from different cultures realize that others have important core values in common with them, they may well sympathize with each other and root for each other's success -- because, in doing so, they are also promoting *their own values*, the ones that are shared. This is the type of cross-cultural goodwill that we need to generate in order to foster real dialogue that can lead to tangible beneficial results.

The building blocks are already in place. They simply need to be recognized and used.

- The intellectual tradition from Islam's Golden Age can supply an alternative Islamic intellectual narrative and serve as a platform from which to counter extremist trends.