



Wasatiyah in Islam

الوسطية في الإسلام

We find ourselves growing up in a globalized society with far-reaching and varied ideas on good living. From lifestyles and identity to culture and ideas on good character, conflicting ideas are inevitable. So what measures can a person put in place to determine what is suitable and worth adopting? We find some guidance on this question in our Islamic teachings. Allah تعالى states¹:

((إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا)) – سورة الإسراء

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“Indeed, this Quran guides to that which is most upright and gives good tidings to the believers who do righteous deeds that they will have a great reward” – Al Quran 17:9.

This article hopes to shed some light on one of the many traits we learn to develop as Muslims. It is quite broad in scope and can be applied in our decision-making and across every aspect of our lives. God-willing it will be of benefit to any reader who is looking to understand some of what it means to be a Muslim.

One of the defining traits of the Ummah (people) of prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, as mentioned in the Quran is that we are “Wasat”:

((وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا)) – سورة البقرة 143

“Thus We made you an Ummah which is wasat...” - Al Quran 2:143

What is Wasat?

Muslim scholars explain the word “wasat” as ‘manzilah baina manzilatain’, or a position between two opposing positions. The two positions specified are the positions of ghuloo and taqsir, overstepping your limits, and falling short in your duties. The word is defined in a number of ways in Arabic dictionaries and books of Tafsir², including:

- Between / in the middle of: in the Wasat of the home is the middle.

¹ تعالى pronounced “Ta’ala” a term of praise indicating the Sublimeness of God.

² The Tafsir books referenced are those of Imam At Tabari, Imam Al Qurtobi, and Imam Ibn Kathir, in their tafsir of the mentioned verse Chapter 3 verse 143.



- the best of: the Wasat of the valley is the best spot in it, and the spot that has the most greenery and water.
- Just: The Awsat of the people are the most just of them. The great Arab poet Zuhair stated about certain Arab tribes at the time:

هُم وَسَطٌ يَرْضَى الْأَنْامُ بِحُكْمِهِمْ إِذَا نَزَلَتْ إِحْدَى اللَّيَالِي الْعَظَائِمِ

They are Wasat, the people are accepting of their counsel, whenever a great calamity descends upon the people.

From the explanation above and considering the context of the verse, we can describe the “Wasat” as being a position away from, better, and more just than the extremes of any matter, a position of balance. The word balance was chosen because a balanced person approaches matters in a healthy way and may recognize and adopt the good in something while avoiding the bad. They are also usually accepted as a mediator and confidante due to the perception that they are fair. Indeed, the common synonyms for “balanced” in the English language include “fair”, “just”, and “stable”.

The below diagram gives a simple illustration for the idea of being “Wasat”. From here onwards I will begin to use the word “balanced” and its derivatives interchangeably with “Wasat” and its derivatives.

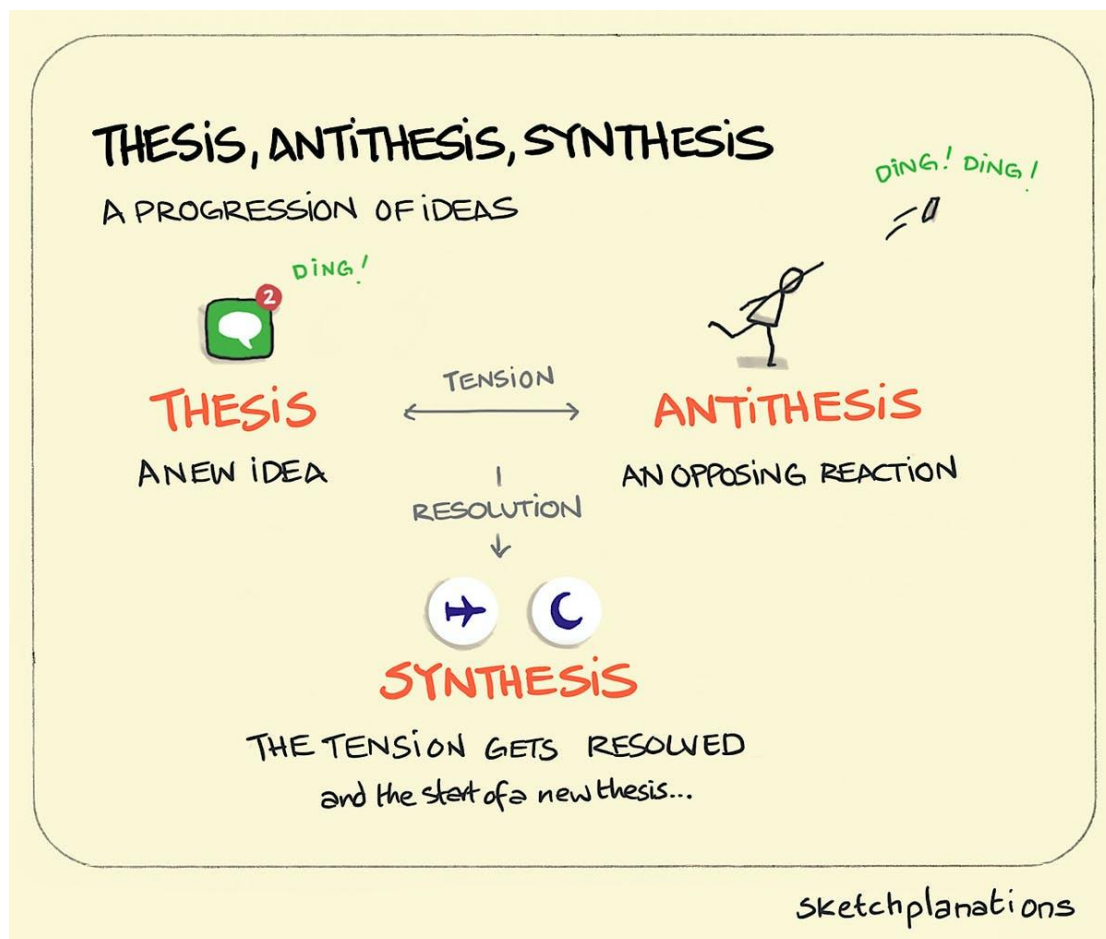


Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis

Society can play a part in the process of adopting a balanced approach to life. New ideas and practices may represent a strong divergence from “the norm”. The way society may find some balance with these ideas and practices is represented in the



following concept.³ The “thesis” in the below diagram is the idea or practice introduced by an entity. This is usually still raw and has not faced much real-world scrutiny. As it is put through the rigors of life it may find varying degrees of success and failure. The critics of the idea or practice may suggest an opposing idea or “antithesis”. The antithesis will also be subjected to scrutiny and the rigors of life until society identifies and adopts what suits it from both methods and rejects what doesn’t suit it, at which point you will have a synthesis of the two ideas or practices. The synthesis occurs to varying degrees and this can be an ongoing process, with the “synthesis” becoming the new “thesis”. An example is the progressive implementation of socialist policies in capitalist nations and the progressive implementation of capitalist policies in socialist nations.



³ This concept was attributed to 19th century German philosopher Georg Hegel.



The above-mentioned concept is not always implemented within a society but does give a good idea of how emerging ideas can be shaped and brought into balance by societal pressure both in favour and in opposition of those ideas. Government and vested interest groups may also attempt to influence this process, but varying agendas can at times make it difficult to arrive at a balanced conclusion.

Proponents and opponents: A false understanding

The discourse within the Muslim community is somewhat polarized in relation to what it means to be “wasat”. Some look at the verse and say Muslims should be moderate, and others reject that notion, saying there is nothing moderate about Islam. A considered look at the disagreement shows that the two groups are disputing different things. The proponents propose that Muslims should understand their boundaries, and the opponents propose that Muslims should not take matters in their faith lightly. When the arguments are framed in this manner it is likely that both sides will appreciate and respect the sentiment of each other.

The extremes can also be desirable, and we often see that the more exaggerated a quality is in someone the more interesting they are to observe and engage with. This is why we see such exaggerations in books and films. A slight sensory tingle is never a cause for conversation. However, a sensory assault is spoken about for long after.⁴ It’s all about how it affected you, moved you, made you feel something you haven’t felt before. The extremes are also not sustainable, lead to a troubled lifestyle and cause more harm than good.

A misconception that arises is that being balanced is uninteresting and has the effect of homogenizing the people. This question was raised with me in the past in relation to the rules around Quran recitation. The balanced approach is to apply all the rules correctly, giving every letter in the Quran its due. You do not overextend the letter, nor do you cut it short. You will find that the reciters who do this best have the most appealing recitation, and you will still find some variance and uniqueness between them.

It is important to keep in mind that there is room for movement in what is

⁴ Trad, Mohammad, Wassatia in Islam, research papers, May 2021



considered the balanced way. Instead of looking at it as a single point, it should be seen as a space which allows movement. This is made clear when considering the requirements stipulated by Dr Ali al-Sallabi for something to be considered “Wasat”: “If a matter has both the quality of khayriyah (it is essentially good), and the quality of bainiyah (it is balanced and away from extremes), only then would it be accurate to describe it as ‘Wasat’, otherwise it is not so”.⁵ In the following passages we will explore how Islam exemplifies this.

Ways in Which the Muslim Ummah is Balanced

There are numerous instructions in the Quran and Sunnah that demonstrate that Islam represents a balanced approach to life. The following passages will give some insight into how we are taught to be balanced in our general attitude towards life, in our lifestyles, and in our actions:

Balanced in attitude towards life: We learn to strike a balance between building our life on this Earth and working towards an eternal life in Paradise. In the first verse Allah praises the people who ask Him for the good of this life as well as the good from the next life. In the verse following it, Allah gives glad tidings of the reward for those who seek both:

((وَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ يَقُولُ رَبَّنَا ءَاتِنَا فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ حَسَنَةً وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ. أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَسَبُوا ۗ وَاللَّهُ سَرِيعٌ ٱلْحِسَابِ)) – سورة البقرة 201 - 202

“And of them are those who say “our Lord, grant us goodness in this life, and goodness in the afterlife, and protect us from the punishment of the fire. It is they who will receive a reward for the good they have done. Surely Allah is swift in account.” - Al Quran 2:201 - 202

In this second example Allah instructs us to seek the afterlife but reminds us to also seek our portion of this life. Allah also reminds us in this verse that He has bestowed goodness upon us, and our duty is to recognize it and bestow it upon others:

((وَأَبْتِغِ فِيمَا ءَاتَىٰكَ اللَّهُ ٱلدَّارَ ٱلْآخِرَةَ وَلَا تَنْسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا ۗ وَأَحْسِنَ ۗ كَمَا أَحْسَنَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ ۗ وَلَا تَبْغِ ٱلْفُسَادَ ۗ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُفْسِدِينَ)) – سورة القصص 77

⁵ Al-Sallabi, A.M.M, Alwasatiyah in the Noble Quran (in Arabic), p.37



“Seek the (reward of) the Hereafter by means of what Allah has granted you, without forgetting your share of this world. And be good (to others) as Allah has been good to you. Do not seek to spread corruption in the land, for Allah certainly does not like the corruptors.” - Al Quran 28:77

The Muslims who focus only on trying to build something for themselves in one life or the other do themselves and the people around them a disservice. For this reason, they must find a balance of giving the right attention to the requirements of each; the worldly life and the afterlife.

In considering the approach to faith, we may observe an unbalanced approach to religious instructions in some people. Some examples are listed below:

- Holding rigidly to an understood instruction in the faith without learning how it should be implemented.
An example is the prohibition on Ghibah (backbiting)⁶. A person may hold to this principal so rigidly that they will avoid backbiting even when it is needed, and permitted in the faith, such as when asked to speak to a person’s character for marriage, legal testimony, entering a business partnership, etc.
- Choosing to understand instructions in a way that conforms with their desires and inclinations, often missing the intended meaning and diverging from the ijma’ (consensus) of the scholars.
An example is the understanding of male/female interactions. We see people who are overly conservative (excluding women from places of worship, placing unreasonable expectations on fiancés, etc.), and others who are too liberal (eg. speaking and mixing in an inappropriate manner under the premise they are doing something good) in their understanding of this matter.
- Placing a strong emphasis on certain instructions (usually the instructions that are easy for them to follow) while taking other instructions lightly.
An example is placing a strong emphasis on certain acts of worship (such as praying or fasting) and taking lightly matters of interpersonal behaviour (such as treating people with courtesy and preserving their dignity).

⁶ Ghibah, or backbiting, is to say something about somebody which while true, is something they don’t like. It is usually negative and is done in their absence but is not always the case.



We are instructed to maintain a balance and be mindful to avoid extremes in our approach to the faith. Allah makes clear in the following verse that excessiveness in the faith is a deviation from the truth:

((لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ غَيْرَ الْحَقِّ)) – سورة المائدة 77

“Do not be excessive in your faith beyond the truth” – Al Quran 5:77

The following hadith of the Prophet peace and blessings upon him reinforces this:

«إِنَّ الدِّينَ يُسْرٌ وَلَنْ يُشَادَّ الدِّينَ أَحَدٌ إِلَّا غَلَبَهُ فَسَدِّدُوا وَقَارِبُوا وَأَبْشِرُوا وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالْعَدْوَةِ وَالرَّوْحَةِ وَشَيْءٍ مِنَ الدَّلْجَةِ» -
صحيح البخاري: كتاب الإيمان

“The Deen (Islam) is indeed easy, and nobody seeks (the path of) difficulty in this faith except that they will be overcome by it. Therefore, aim for balance and what is close to balance and give good tidings, and seek help (in your pious acts by performing them) at the early parts of the day (at your time of strength) and during a portion of the night” – Sahih Al Bukhari: Book of Faith.

In the following verse, Allah emphasizes this point by presenting the example of a matter in which excessiveness is normally not perceived to be blameworthy:

((وَلَا تَجْعَلْ يَدَكَ مَغْلُولَةً إِلَىٰ عُنُقِكَ وَلَا تَبْسُطْهَا كُلَّ الْبَسْطِ فَتَقْعُدَ مَلُومًا مَّحْسُورًا)) – سورة الإسراء 29

“Do not keep your hand at your neck (i.e. regular refusal to spend in charity), nor spread it entirely (i.e. spending too freely), for you will end up blameworthy and destitute” – Al Quran 17:29

A balanced lifestyle: This next verse describes the believers; the men and women who followed the Prophet of Allah peace and blessings upon him and describes the balanced approach to good and evil, pure and impure. With good and evil, there are numerous approaches that are not balanced. One might encourage good but overlook evil, or forbid evil but neglect the good. Some take it a step further and encourage and participate in committing evil acts or discouraging the doing of good,



or both. The approach of the Muslim is detailed here:

((الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ يَأْمُرُهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَاهُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُحِلُّ لَهُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَيُحَرِّمُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْخَبَائِثَ وَيَضَعُ عَنْهُمْ إِصْرَهُمْ وَالْأَغْلَالَ الَّتِي كَانَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۗ فَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا بِهِ ۖ وَعَزَّرُوهُ وَنَصَرُوهُ وَأَتَّبعُوا النُّورَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ مَعَهُ ۗ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ)). الأعراف 157

“Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered prophet, whom they find written in what they have of the Torah and the Gospel, who enjoins upon them what is right and forbids them what is wrong and makes lawful for them the good things and prohibits for them the evil and relieves them of their burden and the shackles which were upon them. As for they who have believed in him, honored him, supported him and followed the light which was sent down with him - it is those who will be the successful.” Al Quran 7:157

Balance in actions: I will elaborate on this with an example. A person may face a dilemma in their relationships from time to time. Their friend, partner, sibling, parent, child, etc. is harming themselves or others with something they are doing. Some may think to end the relationship to preserve their own integrity, while others may find justification to continue to support the person, even when they are doing wrong. The following Hadith offers a balanced solution, one that does not involve prematurely turning away from the relationship, nor does it involve participating in doing something wrong:

"انصُرْ أَخَاكَ ظَلِمًا أَوْ مَظْلُومًا". فَقَالَ رَجُلٌ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ أَنْصُرُهُ إِذَا كَانَ مَظْلُومًا، أَفَرَأَيْتَ إِذَا كَانَ ظَلِمًا كَيْفَ أَنْصُرُهُ قَالَ " تَحْجُرُهُ أَوْ تَمْنَعُهُ مِنَ الظُّلْمِ، فَإِنَّ ذَلِكَ نَصْرُهُ " - صحيح البخاري: كتاب الإكراه

"Support your brother whether he is an oppressor or an oppressed," A man said, "O Allah's Messenger (ﷺ)! I will help him if he is oppressed, but if he is an oppressor, how shall I help him?" The Prophet (ﷺ) said, *"By preventing him from oppressing (others), for that is how to help him."* – Sahih Al Bukhari: Book of Coercion.

The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, actively worked to ensure his people did not deviate from his path, and when brainstorming this topic I found the following story to be a very clear indication of his effort:



Three companions asked the wife of the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, about his acts of worship, and upon comparing them to their own felt that they were not doing nearly enough. So one of them decided he would fast every day, while another said he will spend the entirety of his nights in worship, and the third stated that he would avoid women. When the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, heard of their decision, he called for them, and stated: *as for me, I fast (at times) and I don't fast (at others), I worship at night and I also rest, and I marry women. whosoever desires other than my Sunnah (path), then he or she is not from me (my people)* – Sahih Al Bukhari: Book of Marriage, and Sahih Muslim: Book of Marriage

At this stage in the article, I thought it would be a good idea to reproduce the “Wasat” diagram with more precise examples of deviations relating to the information provided above.



Conclusion

The examples listed in this article should present as a good guide to help keep our ideas and practices as “Wasat”; to keep them within the balanced space away from extremes, defects and injustice, and within the boundaries that Allah has set for us.

Being aware of the potential for deviation will help us to avoid it. Keeping to the guidance of Allah and taking lessons from the life of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, will help us to remain balanced. As Muslims we learn to strive to be examples of justice, goodness, and balance in our approach to matters.

Finally, I would like to thank AFIC's Da'wa and Iftaa Manager Sheikh M Trad, and the Most Eminent Imam Abdul Quddoos Al Azhari, the National Grand Mufti of Australia for their advice and supporting research.

And Allah Ta'ala knows best.

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