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Key note speech - Finding the moderate voice within

Berger, M.S.

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Conference launching the *Global Movement of Moderates*

1st session: 'FINDING THE MODERATE VOICE WITHIN'

Kuala Lumpur, 17 January 2012

By prof dr Maurits Berger
Leiden University
The Netherlands

Mr prime minister, your excellencies, dear colleagues and participants,

I am honoured with this invitation, and want to thank the organization for inviting me to this important event.

I applaud this initiative wholeheartedly. Too much attention has been drawn in the past years to the minority of extremists, eclipsing the vast majority of moderates. Their voice needs to be heard. But this also requires that they need to raise their voice. This is one of those moments where this is happening.

The need for moderation is a global need, but I have been asked to talk about Islam and the Muslim world. And that brings me to another reason that I applaud this initiative because, to my mind, the Muslim community is in need of soul searching. Let me explain.

The argument 'these extremists are only a few, and therefore not representative of Islam' does not suffice anymore. It is too defensive, denying realities and questions that affect every single Muslim.

In retrospect I think that Muslims missed an opportunity here. After 9/11, Western media were in desperate need of Muslim voices to comment on what happened, to put it in perspective.

But Muslims were reluctant to do so. On the one hand because they felt offended to be held accountable for these atrocities that were committed in the name of Islam. But also because they were deeply apprehensive of Western media that were suspect of bias against Islam and therefore not receptive of any nuance.

These suspicions were not unfounded. For instance, the many condemnations among Muslim scholars and leaders of the 9/11 attacks hardly reverberated in the Western media.

These reasons for not opening up to Western media, are therefore perfectly understandable. But the net result was that Muslims felt no need to open up at all, and to ask themselves in a critical manner what had happened to their religion and their societies?

As a Saudi newspaper columnist already wrote in 2002: 'not all Muslims are terrorists, but almost all terrorists are Muslims,' calling for introspection by Muslims themselves. The question that needs to be answered by Muslims is: how can it be that this beautiful and fulfilling religion of mine inspires others to become so extreme and even violent?

What has happened to us, Muslims, that we have produced so many young men and women that are ready to commit atrocities, tainting Islam with the image of a violent religion?

Looking in the mirror takes courage. No more can one hide behind the excuse 'it is not me, but that crazy man over there, so do not hold me accountable for his actions.' From an Islamic perspective, this initiative, to my mind is therefore first and foremost an endeavour of accountability of Muslims by Muslims.

But this initiative is not an easy undertaking, because it immediately raises the problem of the measure stick of this accountability. We, here, are all favouring something that we agree upon, but that we cannot define. For what is this moderation? I do not want to be the academic who spoils a discussion by dwelling on the definition of the terminology used. But some clarity is needed about what we are getting ourselves into. I want to make four remarks on this:

First: unfortunately, moderation is dull. If Islam, or any religion for that matter, is love, justice and self-fulfilment, than we do not want to be moderate but, to the contrary, go the full mile.

Moderation is a typical quality of the elderly, and definitely not of the young. And that is where we find most expressions of extremism. If we want to reach them, we must be aware of their needs, and of the language they speak.

And although we may all agree that it is high time that the young listen to the old, it is of paramount importance that we face the fact that in the Muslim world the young constitute a large majority, sometimes reaching half of the population of Muslim countries, and that they claim a say.

Second: One person's moderate is another person's extremist. Some Muslim intellectuals have moderate opinions from my point of view, but are considered apostates by others. Liberals will be considered extremists by conservatives, and vice versa.

And this brings me to my third remark: moderation runs the risk of becoming a source of censorship. Disallowing opinions that one considers immoderate is in itself an act of censorship that quells any discussion. Moderation may then become a stifling blanket that dampens all variety of views and deafens our ears for other opinions and expressions. And as I said before, if we refuse to hear the opinions of the youth however

extremist they may sound, we will miss our objective of bringing Islam back into the fold of loving humanity.

Fourthly and finally, one must not only talk the talk, but walk the walk. Muslims go to great lengths to proclaim the moderation and justice of Islam. That is all very nice, but Islam in action shows many examples to the contrary.

One may profess Islam's religious tolerance, but this becomes merely theory or history when we look at what is happening to Ahmadiyya in Pakistan, Bangladesh or Indonesia, or to Christians in Nigeria, or to Muslims anywhere in the Muslim world who want to openly and critically discuss their religion, or even to change to another religion.

One may profess Islam's justice, but this becomes merely theory or history when we look at what is happening to women in Afghanistan, to refugees in Darfur or Somalia, to the lack of democracy and good governance in so many Muslim nations.

One may profess Islam's humanity, but this becomes merely theory or history when we look at stoning of people, slicing throats of hostages, suicide attacks on innocents and other atrocities.

Yes, we all know that this is not Islam, but it is being done in the name of Islam. It makes Islam guilty by association.

I say this with emphasis, because it is one of the main problems I face in Western Europe when discussing Islam, as I am sure you do as well. Every time I argue the tolerance, justice or humanity of Islam, I am questioned about the practice of Islam that shows the opposite. And I lose that argument big time, because in the end, practice is the measure stick of any religion.

One of the main challenges of this initiative, therefore, will be to bring Islam's teachings in line with Muslims' actions.

Taking these four points into consideration, I want to address the topic of this session, that is 'finding the moderate within'. I suggest that moderation should not be a quality based on opinions and voices of people, but on the basis of their interaction. The true moderate, to my mind, is the person who can be tolerant of others, regardless of his or her own opinions.

I have befriended several Muslims who are too conservative to my personal taste, and who hold religious views I disagree with, but who possess the quality of curiosity and love for the world around them.

They do not feel the need to enforce their beliefs on me or on their environment, nor do they condemn me or their environment for holding other views. They have a rare self-confidence in their beliefs and

demeanour that allows them to be interested in everything and everyone around them without being offended by it.

And while their views may not necessarily be moderate from my perspective, they are moderate in their interaction with me and the world. These are the voices that I think need to be heard.

Thank you