

Moderate wisdom

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 20, 2014](#) issue



The Mar Behnam monastery, built in the fourth century and located near the city of Mosul, Iraq. ISIS fighters stormed the monastery in late July. Wikimedia Commons public domain image

In worship we had just heard the story of Jacob's famous dream about the ladder extending from earth to heaven. The minister prayed: "O God, who gives us dreams and visions, we hear the news of the world, and it feels like we are in the midst of a dream bordering upon nightmare." She proceeded to hold up the litany of tragedy that was on our hearts that morning: the attack on a Malaysian airliner causing 298 fatalities; violence between Israel and Hamas with hundreds of innocent Palestinian deaths; unaccompanied children from Central America crossing our border to escape danger and being met with red-faced anger and resentment; resurgent Islamic extremism in Iraq.

It's a nightmarish moment, and it seems to me that intolerant extremism has never been so ascendant. Extremists seem to be in charge everywhere.

Philip Jenkins ("[Leaving Nineveh](#)") describes the sad consequences of ongoing Iraqi disintegration and the emergence of a very violent Islamism. The northern Iraqi city of Mosul, which incorporates ancient Nineveh, is part of the huge geographic area recently taken over by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a militant extremist group which aspires to bring much of the Muslim world under its absolute control. ISIS has declared the entire area a new caliphate and has claimed authority over all Muslims.

Of course, religious and political extremism is not new. Back in the 1960s, Harry and Bonaro Overstreet wrote *The Strange Tactics of Extremism*. A generation ago, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote: “The great source of evil in this life is the absolutizing of the relative.” That’s exactly what’s happening when ISIS militants threaten to kill Christians, Israeli extremists call for “Death to Arabs,” and Hamas extremists celebrate the kidnapping and murder of Jewish young men.

The world desperately needs an energetic renewal of intelligent moderation in politics and in religion. Our own nation could use some as well. The shameful immigration crisis at our border continues because extremists in the Republican Party regard working with Democrats as rank heresy.

I’m praying for a renaissance of moderation. If we need a model of what moderation looks like, we could turn to Acts 15 and read about a compromise in a serious conflict between the first Christians.

Each side in that conflict was sure of the truth and rightness of its position. Each side was persuaded by Peter and James to compromise. Each gave a little and got a little. Some say it was on that day, a day of thoughtful listening and compromise, that the early Christian enterprise was transformed from a local sect into a world religion.