

# Moderation

## LIGHTHOUSE PROJECT EPISODE 3

### **BEAM 1: Moderation Unleashed**

*Exploring the definition of moderation and its relevancy to MAS members*

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### **BEAM 2: Moderation Applied**

*Overcoming the challenges that we face as MAS members*

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*How individualistic moderation leads to a moderate society...*

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**Note: This document and the material linked in it should ONLY be used for education and discussion purposes and do not necessarily represent the position of MAS or that of MAS Tarbiya team**

## What is the Lighthouse Project?

The Lighthouse Project (LHP) is a tarbiya initiative offered by MAS' National Tarbiya Department (MTD). This project aims at dynamically interacting with MAS members and their surrounding circles. This interaction is in the form of comprehensive messages to help MAS members succeed in their endeavors. These messages will allow MAS members to:

- Grow intellectually and spiritually
- Overcome challenges and defeat temptations
- Develop certain character traits and nurture particular skills
- Be cognizant of important issues and events
- Share a common vision and understanding throughout the nation

MAS members will receive the Lighthouse messages periodically, often quarterly, from the MTD. These messages will help achieve the aforementioned goals through: engaging with the reading material, participating in local and national discussions, attending web seminars, and carrying out some practical assignments.

## Illuminating Moderation

As American Muslims we all strive to reach the highest levels in regards to both *deen* and *dunya* and oftentimes we may find ourselves focusing on one particular field, or overextending ourselves in many different projects. Allah (swt) says in the Qur'an what may be translated as, "Thus have We made of you *ummatan wassatan* that you may be witnesses over the nations and the Messenger a witness over yourselves;" (tr. Qur'an 2:143). An *Ummah of Wassatiyya* has been translated as, "a middle nation," "a nation justly balanced," as well as, "a just and best nation," (Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, Dr. Mohsin). It is obvious that there is no clear word that encompasses the idea of *wassatiyya*, but rather, the definition is layered, deep, and thought provoking. What makes us a "moderate" nation? How can we be sure that we are always staying on the "middle path?" Can MAS members come to some type of consensus regarding real life situations which require a just and moderate solution? How can we properly use the Qur'an and Sunnah to gain a deeper idea of this important value? These will be just a few of the questions that this episode, with your involvement, intends to answer, *insha'Allah*. The LHP team has organized this episode into three distinct beams,

- Moderation Unleashed-** Understanding Moderation through the Qur'an and Sunnah
- Moderation Applied-** Real Life Situations which will involve Case Studies and Practical Assignments in the life of a n American Muslim
- Moderation in Society-** Living in America, we are faced with over-consumption in regards to food, clothing, technology, etc. How can we tackle these societal ills while remaining relevant to our communities?

## When to Absorb Light: Suggested Timeline

This comprehensive offering may be a bit daunting to tackle, so we have provided you with a suggested timeline, in order to process and absorb the aspects of moderation raised in this episode:

- **April 27 to May 8** Familiarize yourself, connects, and family members with Beam I- Moderation Unleashed. Read all material and engage in discussion points
- **May 9** Moderation Unleashed Webinar with Dr. Jamal Badawi from 8-10 pm Eastern Time
- **May 10 to May 29** Use this time to read, discuss, analyze and implement Beam II- Moderation Applied
- **June 6** Webinar on Case Studies hosted by Hossam Al-Jabri, with MAS Members, Rami Kawas, Khadigah Alasry and others (On 6/6/2010, 8-10pm EST).
- **May 31 to June 13** Use this time to engage with Beam III material, Moderation in Society. Complete all reading material



# Beam 1: Moderation Unleashed

*“And thus we have made you a middle community that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you...”*  
— Qur’an 2:143

## Beam Summary:

Moderation, or the Arabic term, "*wassatiyyah*," seems like a simple idea when we first hear it. We just need to find a middle point between two extremes - that's not so difficult, right? Then, comes the task of actually applying this into our daily lives....not so easy, is it? With so many responsibilities, ideologies, dreams, and obstacles pulling us in different directions, it can become rather simple to lose sight of this core value in Islam. The first beam, "Moderation Unleashed," will explore the multi-dimensional, layered definition of moderation, primarily basing the discussion around what we find in the Qur'an and Sunnah. This first beam will also focus on why moderation is an essential element to inculcate into our daily lives while offering thought provoking questions on what may or may not qualify as moderate.

## How to Get Light

- Read all recommended resources
- Do and discuss the practical assignment
- Discuss the topic with connects, family members and colleges
- Attend Webinar with Dr. Jamaal Badawi
- Continue asking questions, blog your thoughts, and provide feedback

## Discussion Points:

- What is moderation? What is the Qur'anic definition of it? How do scholars define it?
- How is it defined by the messenger? How did he demonstrate it?
- How is moderation related to "easiness," "balance," and "comprehensiveness," features of Islam?
- What are the wrong understanding of this word and the implications of this wrong understanding?
- What is the difference between moderation and mediocrity? Moderation and loose views? Moderation and less commitment?
- Is moderation a middle point?
  - Is it really a point? or probably a band around this point?
  - Are moderate choices universal? or it changes from one person to another or from one context to another?
- What role can moderation play in terms of fulfilling our duties?
  - How can moderation help when I have competing duties: family, work, MAS, etc.?
  - What is the right choice?
    - Doing a little bit of everything?
    - Focus on one duty that is most important?
    - Focus on what I can do or want to do?
  - Is focusing on one area of work or expertise against moderation?
    - How can I be moderate while being an expert in one thing?
- Islam is the religion of moderation
  - Isn't it guaranteed for a Muslim to be in a state of moderation by just belonging to the religion of moderation?
  - Isn't doing my best to be a good Muslim enough to make me a person of moderation?

## Practical Assignments:

- Have at least one conversation with someone that has an opposing demeanor, attitude, ideology, perspective
  - Examples: Hunter vs. PETA activist
  - The point is to not convince them or argue your point, but to engage people that are 180 degrees opposite of you

Watch this video: <http://www.hulu.com/watch/56907/30-days-outsourcing>

You must create a login to see the video. Video content is clean.



## Webinar:

- *"Moderation Unleashed"* by **Dr. Jamal Badawi**

**When:** May 9th 2010

**Time:** 8:00 pm=10:00 pm EST

To Register:

<https://www2.gotomeeting.com/register/848944611>

**Jamal A. Badawi** is a Canadian-based professor and world-renowned speaker, author, and advocate of Islam and Muslims. He has authored several books and articles on Islam. He also researched, designed and presented a 352-segment television series on Islam, aired in Canada, the US and other countries. Audio and video copies of this series are widely available.

## Beam 1 Resources:

### Must-reads

- **Moderation by Ahmed Saad**
  - Actually, the 'wasat' (middle) is a synonym for 'virtue' because 'virtue' is defined as "the midpoint between two bad characters or two bad extremes".
    - <http://www.islamicforumeurope.com/live/ife.php?doc=articleitem&itemId=324>
- **1st 10 principles of Wasatiyyah by Qaradawi**
  - In a time when the Islamic arena is wrought with varying perspectives, some to the far left and some to the far right and many floating around in the center, Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi has summarized his entire life mission of calling to a balanced and moderate understanding of Islam into thirty key principles.
    - <http://www.suhaibwebb.com/islam-studies/the-30-principles-of-wasatiyyah/>
- **Is moderation a mediocre trait?!**
  - "That, however, is mediocrity, though it be called moderation."
    - <http://www.philosophersnotes.com/ideas/show/mediocrity-moderation>
- **What is moderation in religion by Uthaymeen**
  - Moderation in religion means that one does not exaggerate and go beyond the limit set by Allah, and that one does not neglect it and fall short of the limit set by Allah.
    - <http://islamqa.com/en/ref/9466/moderation>
- **Conversation amongst LHP members**
  - An awesome chat between MAS team about what moderation really is
    - [http://docs.google.com/View?id=dcknwgw5\\_202fw42qggj](http://docs.google.com/View?id=dcknwgw5_202fw42qggj)

### Recommended

- **Jamal Badawi interview in Arabic**
  - [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA\\_C&cid=1237705847205&pagename=Zone-Arabic-MDarik/MDALayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1237705847205&pagename=Zone-Arabic-MDarik/MDALayout)
- **Conference on Moderation in Arabic**
  - [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA\\_C&cid=1269509704379&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1269509704379&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout)
- **Difficulty in Islam - A Fiqh Perspective**
  - [http://www.suhaibwebb.com/islam-studies/"-and-has-not-placed-upon-you-in-the-religion-any-difficulty"/](http://www.suhaibwebb.com/islam-studies/)
- **Moderation in the Qur'an by Hammudah Abdulati**
  - [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article\\_C&cid=1158658473896&pagename=Zone-English-Living\\_Shariah/LSELAYOUT](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1158658473896&pagename=Zone-English-Living_Shariah/LSELAYOUT)



# Beam 2: Moderation Applied

## *Day-to-day Challenges*

### Beam Summary

In the first lighthouse beam, you should have learned about the concept of *Al-Wasatiyyah* in the Quran, in the tradition of the Messenger (pbuh), and in the terminology of scholars. You should have a clear understanding of how the word is misunderstood or partially understood by people—how the concept can be incorrectly used to justify mediocrity, reduced commitment, or a lesser degree of passion or exertion. You should also have developed an understanding of how to make yourself belong to the community of *wasat*, as Allah described the believers in the Qur'an.

Correct understanding is, however, only the beginning of the journey. We must develop the skills of putting our understanding into practice. How can we use what we learned to solve our real-life challenges?

First of all, let's define moderation in a slightly nuanced way. This definition will reflect the essence of moderation while drawing attention to how it interacts with our daily life. Think of moderation as:

*The struggle to reach a peak of excellence despite the downward-pulling forces of extremes.*

How is this definition different than what we have discussed earlier? It focuses on the *process* of achieving moderation. Moderation is not a point or a value, but a continuous endeavor. In the struggle to achieve moderation in the face of temptations, partial understanding, and misplaced priorities, we must continually readjust the location of our personal peak of excellence. Personal circumstances and context play a big role in determining where our peak of excellence is, and the struggle for moderation may vary from person to person and even from day to day.

In *Moderation Applied*, this second beam of the moderation episode, we want to tackle the challenges that MAS members meet in trying to reach the peak of excellence in our lives. Because MAS members are immersed in community activism, constantly engaged in outreach and service, interact with many people and challenges, and aspire for high personal goals, the extremes that threaten to weigh us down may be more than the average Muslim.

## How to Get Light

- Plan to attend the webinar on June 6 that will address the case studies. Don't forget to pre-register and make sure your usra/Connect/team has registered too!
  - Plan to attend the webinar on 6/6/2010 with **Hossam Aljabri**, 8-10pm EST. (See events below for more details).
- Use the case studies in your circles or usra and be ready for some deep discussion. Look over the discussion points to help you identify critical areas of understanding and application.
- With your team, discuss and prepare an entry for the Case Studies in Moderation contest (see resource section)
- Share your personal experience and feedback through discussion and comments on the MAS Tarbiya blog and on MAS discussion lists. This will enrich the material and give it value.
- Try to engage with people around you within MAS and outside in what you learn through this beam for wider feedback and larger benefits. Give a khutba, blog, write a note on Facebook, and try new ways of taking the message to others.



## Webinar:

- “*Moderation Applied: A Conversation among MAS members*” by **Hossam Aljabri**

**When:** June 6th 2010

**Time:** 8:00 pm-10:00 pm EST

To Register:

<https://www2.gotomeeting.com/register/486463923>

**Hossam Aljabri** is the Executive Director of the [Muslim American Society](#), a national grassroots organization, with more than 50 chapters across the US. Aljabri is a preacher and speaker on [Islam](#) and Muslims. He is the previous president of the Muslim American Society – Boston Chapter, and a trustee of the Inter religious center on Public Life (ICPL). He is a signatory of the “Building a Community of Trust” declaration of peace, affirming a positive relation between Jews and Muslims, and the right of both people to live and prosper in Israel/Palestine. Aljabri is a speaker in national conferences, such as the MAS-[ICNA](#) national conventions.

## Case Studies (Located in the Appendix)

The enclosed case studies (see appendix) are the main portion of this beam. Your discussions and the amount of thought and exploration on each case study will determine how much you benefit from this section. You may use the focus points at the end of each case study to help direct the discussion, or better yet, allow the discussion to flow freely.

Feel free to use some or all of the case studies. It is not necessary to cover all of them, but try to tackle at least three. You may choose to look them over carefully with your discussion group to select the most relevant ones.

Here are some general guidelines and discussion points for using the case studies.

- Focus on the *process* of achieving moderation as opposed to what the destination looks like. What steps and tools must the individual/group/community utilize in order to help them reach a point of excellent moderation
- Identify the different extremes in each scenario. What are the dangers of falling into each one of those extremes?
- If the discussion members differ in what they think would be a moderate choice, why might those differences exist? Are our choices close enough or are they radically different? If they are different, what are the possible reasons? Different personal circumstances? Different priorities?
- After going through several case studies, can you identify a standard process or a collection of tools that can be used to help us determine the optimum moderate choice? These tools and criteria could be: textual, historical, experiential, specific criteria such as “the least risky”, “the most beneficial to the mission”, as well as other creative methods.
- On a scale of 1-10, decide how relevant each case study was to you or your chapter. Discuss why and how you assigned the number. Which was the most challenging case study?



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# Beam 3: Moderation in Society

*Examining our Society for Moderation and Where We Fall*

## Beam Summary

One of the fruits that Islam can bring to our society is moderation. Our Muslim community and our society at large are in a real need for this value. Although the society values moderation and considers it an important attribute, there is a large room for improvement due to the misunderstanding and lack of implementation. In this light beam, we will continue the discussion of the concept of moderation as it applies to our society and our normal life. We will examine our society for moderation and discuss how we can play a role to help ourselves, our families, our communities, and the whole society to establish this important value. We will focus on a few examples to help us apply moderation to all aspects of our society.

## How to get Light

- Read the highlights of the book, "The Culture of Excess: How America Lost Self-Control and Why We Need to Redefine Success"
  - Watch the video about the "digital nation"  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation/view/>
  - Go through the discussion points on the next page. Discuss it in your Connect and create a discussion about it with your family, colleges, or friends
- Note: you can go through the material and the discussion in your MY-Connect or make a community event around it

## Discussion Points:

- What do you think of the idea of analyzing our society for moderation?
  - How can we do that?
  - Do we need to be experts in sociology to be able to do so?
  - What kind of attributes we are looking for to measure our society's moderation?
- In the light of what you read in the articles and watched on the video, please analyze the following areas
  - Our society and entertainment (or consumption/the excess culture/eating/shopping)
    - Isn't entertainment something good and permissible by Islam?
    - People engage in a lot of entertainment and this did not stop them from being successful?
    - Don't you think people do this too much? Isn't it better to spend this money and time in something more useful?
    - How about the much wrong taking place in the entertainment business?
    - What is the right balance?
    - How can I be moderate in my engagement with entertainment as an individual? As a family?
  - Our society and social media?
    - Doesn't using the social add to our ability to make more friends and interact with them more often?
      - Isn't that encouraged by Islam? Isn't that going to open a whole new life experience and a whole new candidates of friendship?
      - Isn't even an avenue for more learning and more business?
    - Does it have negative effects?
      - What are these effects? What are the problems of using social media?
      - Does it really take away skills and abilities as popularly known?
      - What kind of skills it takes away? Doesn't actually add more skills?
    - What is the attitude of moderation of using social media?
      - How can we use its benefit and avoid its negative consequences?
      - How can we help people around us do so?
  - Our society and violence
    - Is there a direct relation between violence and moderation?
    - Is extremism in general a direct cause of violence?
    - Weren't many violent disasters an outcome of extreme views and actions?
    - How about the Muslim community? Is the violence committed by or promoted by Muslims a result of extreme views?
      - If no, then why else?
- How can we bring our society to moderation?
  - Does the main stream society understand moderation the same way we understand it?
  - In the above examples, don't you think the mainstream society agrees?
  - Not all the society defines moderation the way Muslims do. Not even all Muslims define moderation similarly. How can we call people to moderation then?



## Beam 3 Resources:

- "The Straight Path Campaign" Article, by Nancy Khalil
  - See Page 21 of the Appendix
- "Moderation and the US: Finding the Middle Path" Article by Najeeb Kamel
  - See Page 27 of the Appendix
- "The Culture of Excess: How America Lost Self-Control and Why We Need to Redefine Success,"
  - Book highlights by Anees Shaikh
    - See Page 23 of the Appendix
  - <http://www.amazon.com/Culture-Excess-America-Self-Control-Redefine/dp/0313377685>
- The Digital Nation
 

Does the Internet promote freedom of expression and communication, making it a catalyst for democracy and activism? Is the net tilted towards Democracy and participatory society? Meanwhile, do services like Facebook and Twitter encourage virtual and superficial involvement over dedication to the kind of activism that makes a difference? Does it just take people off the streets, blogging safely in their homes where they no longer threaten repressive regimes?

  - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation/view/>



# APPENDIX

## CASE STUDY I: Deen vs. Dunya

It was 11 pm, and Imraan still wasn't back from the halaqa. His parents were awake, waiting for him, glancing at the clock and the door, over and over again. He wasn't answering his cell phone. Finally, around midnight, they heard his car pull into the driveway.

It had been a long, but productive day. Starting at Fajr, Imraan was up. He went to school and then to the library to study before heading to the masjid where he attended his usra, which was cut short so they could help set up for a MAS event. After helping set up for the evening, Imraan went to pick up the speaker from the airport. Imraan gave a 5-minute speech and reflection after isha prayer, and although he could hear his phone vibrating in his pocket several times, he was not distracted. Imraan could feel his faith getting higher and higher. There was so much work that had to be done, so much reward to gain. If only his parents understood. He opened the door.

“Do you have any idea what time it is? How worried your mother and I were? Where were you?”

“I was at the MAS halaqa.”

“I am so sick of this MAS work. Are you the only person they can find? Is MAS going to take your exams for you too?”

“I’ll be fine. Besides, it’s not as if these exams will determine my place in the hereafter. Even if I don’t get into medical school, how does that affect the bigger picture? No prophet graduated from medical school. No companion was an MD. And they will be far above anything a doctor will ever be.”

“I don’t know what you have been learning. Where does it say in Islam to disobey your parents? I’m not asking you to stop praying. You have an exam coming up in a few months. My son, you need to focus on it. Please, no more MAS work until you finish your exams.”

**Focus Points** - you may use these questions to help direct the discussion, or, even better, let the discussion to develop on its own

1. How is Imraan’s passion and enthusiasm typical or atypical of other young people?
2. Does moderation simply mean toning down his level of commitment and diversifying his efforts? Would it be a point of excellent moderation for Imraan to decide to quit medical school and dedicate himself to being a driving force in the Muslim community?
3. What are the different extremes that Imraan is navigating? Think deeper than the obvious two: career and Islamic work.
4. Do you think if Imraan achieves a point of excellent moderation his productivity and dedication to MAS could actually increase? How so?



## CASE STUDY II: Let's Just Work!

Since the first day you learned about Islam, you know that everything is in the hands of Allah. Nothing happens without His permission and nothing is possible without His help. Since you started the path of working for the cause of Allah, you have held strongly to the principle of focusing on our actions and intentions and trusting in Allah (swt) for the results. You feel empowered and calm knowing that you rely only on Allah (swt). This belief helps you overcome frustration and focus on the action as opposed to results.

In a MAS Youth committee in your chapter, you attended a meeting designed to evaluate the results of the past year. Since you are new to MAS, this is the first time you engage in such a meeting. You were surprised to hear comments like,

"We have been working for a whole year with no results."

"The number of youth who come to our events is really minimal."

"We need to have better marketing. If we don't have good marketing, it doesn't matter if our events are the best, no one will know."

"We have to think of better ways to be relevant to the youth."

The frustration seems to increase with every comment.

You speak up and say, "Guys! Results are in the hands of Allah. Don't get frustrated. We have to just continue working and we will have the full reward insha'allah. We can't guarantee the outcome of our work. Didn't the Prophet try many things and they did not work?! And Allah (swt) comforted him in the Quran that he was not responsible for whether people believe."

One of the sisters didn't like what you said. She said, "What if we are doing something wrong? How are we going to improve if we do not become result-oriented? I think results are the only indicator of our success. Otherwise, why are we meeting and evaluating?" You feel the sister is completely off and too focused on material results. Where is her trust? She does not have Allah in the equation at all.

### Focus Points

1. What are the different extremes you are dealing with here?
2. What kind of signals can alert us that we are following a path that is slightly, or greatly, diverging from moderation?
3. How do we find the point of moderation between being results-oriented and having trust; between marketing and just doing the work; between having dry, process-oriented meetings and making our work extremely spiritual?



## CASE STUDY III: Becoming Dry

Yasmin is a very active sister. She is like an engine, full of energy and excitement. "You want a project to succeed, give it to Yasmin!" everyone says.

Lately, Yasmin started attending a council for different MSAs and city youth organizations as a representative of the local MAS chapter. Yasmin, as usual, was a ball of energy, sharing all of what MAS does. However, Yasmin often left the meetings feeling deflated. She was so impressed by some of the people in the meeting. Their level of Islamic knowledge and religious dedication was so high. In some of the discussions, other people were able to quote verses and Quran that she could never remember. When she asked individuals how they found time to learn so much, they listed the places they had studied and the many circles of learning they frequented. One brother told her that he tried to minimize the number of projects he engaged in since it took away from his time for knowledge, which he believed was a top priority.

Yasmin felt that all of her activism in MAS paled in comparison to the impressive knowledge these people had. She now feels drained and dry in her knowledge and spiritual provision. All she does is run around, organize events, and attend meetings.

"I think I'm going to take a break from MAS work for a while," says Yasmin to her MY Connect group one day. "I can't continue like this!"

Khadigah, who is new to MAS and was initially attracted to MAS because of Yasmin's personality, says, "But who will take care of this huge amount of work if you stop? We need you, Yasmin. Plus, who will be the role model for girls like me if you retreat to your books?"

"No I am not!" Yasmin responded, frustrated. "You guys can't feel it. I feel empty, dry, and ignorant. I don't know much Quran. If I don't take time to recharge and learn, I won't be able to continue like this. I can hardly recite a single verse without making a mistake. I need fuel and support from somewhere else other than planning activities. Most important of all, I need to get closer to Allah. I can't do that while being an overwhelmed project manager and not giving my spirit and mind enough time to grow and develop."

Ruba added, "Yes, as a matter of fact, learning is not everything. Khalid ibn Al-Walid used to make mistakes in the Qur'an because he was busy leading in the battlefield. You are perfectly fine, Yasmin, and you are doing more good here with us than seeking knowledge."

### Focus Points

1. What tools and observations is Yasmin using to determine her ideal point of excellence? What are the different extremes that Yasmin is wrestling with?
2. Is it OK to withdraw and focus on a single aspect of our lives sometimes? How do we know?
3. Do you or have you ever felt like Yasmin?
4. If you were Yasmin's mentor, the person to whom she will come for advice, what kind of discussion will you have with her? Do you have any ideas or solutions that might help her?
5. Let one of the group embrace Yasmin's role and try, as a group, through warm discussion to comfort her and help her find a moderate solution. After you are done, think of the tools and the criterion you all used to help Yasmin



## CASE STUDY IV: Movement Identity

It is very essential that we always think of American Muslims, especially those who are active as one movement to convey Islam and better society. This movement is above all names and all organizations, above individuals and what they represent.

My name does not matter and my organizational affiliation is insignificant compared to this noble cause. We can just be part of the movement without assigning loyalties to any organization. So, are strong organizations, especially national ones, even necessary?

But wait, isn't it important to build strong institutions to be able to tackle serious challenges and large projects? Isn't organizational identity essential for describing who we are and what we stand for? Isn't our organization's name necessary to motivate people to join us and own our mission? We can belong to an organization that achieves a well-defined goal while still being part of the American Muslim movement.

On the other hand, do you think we overdo it? Does organizational identity and loyalty become a source of disunity and lack of cooperation? We have seen projects fail and communities split due to this extreme organizational and sometimes individual identity. Why can't we downplay organizational affiliation for the sake of unity? Why can't we set an example to all organizations of how to belong to the greater movement? How can we make this organizational belonging a source of strength rather than weakness? How can we develop the "moderate" vision between being organizationally fanatic and having the practical benefits of strong organizations?

### Focus Points

1. Does MAS in your experience achieve a point of moderation between organizational identity and unity? Why or why not?
2. If you could refine or rewrite MAS' approach to organizational identity so as to reach a point of excellent moderation, what would it be?
3. Do you think the point of moderation differs on local and national levels? Can it change from time to time?



## Case Study V: Gradualism

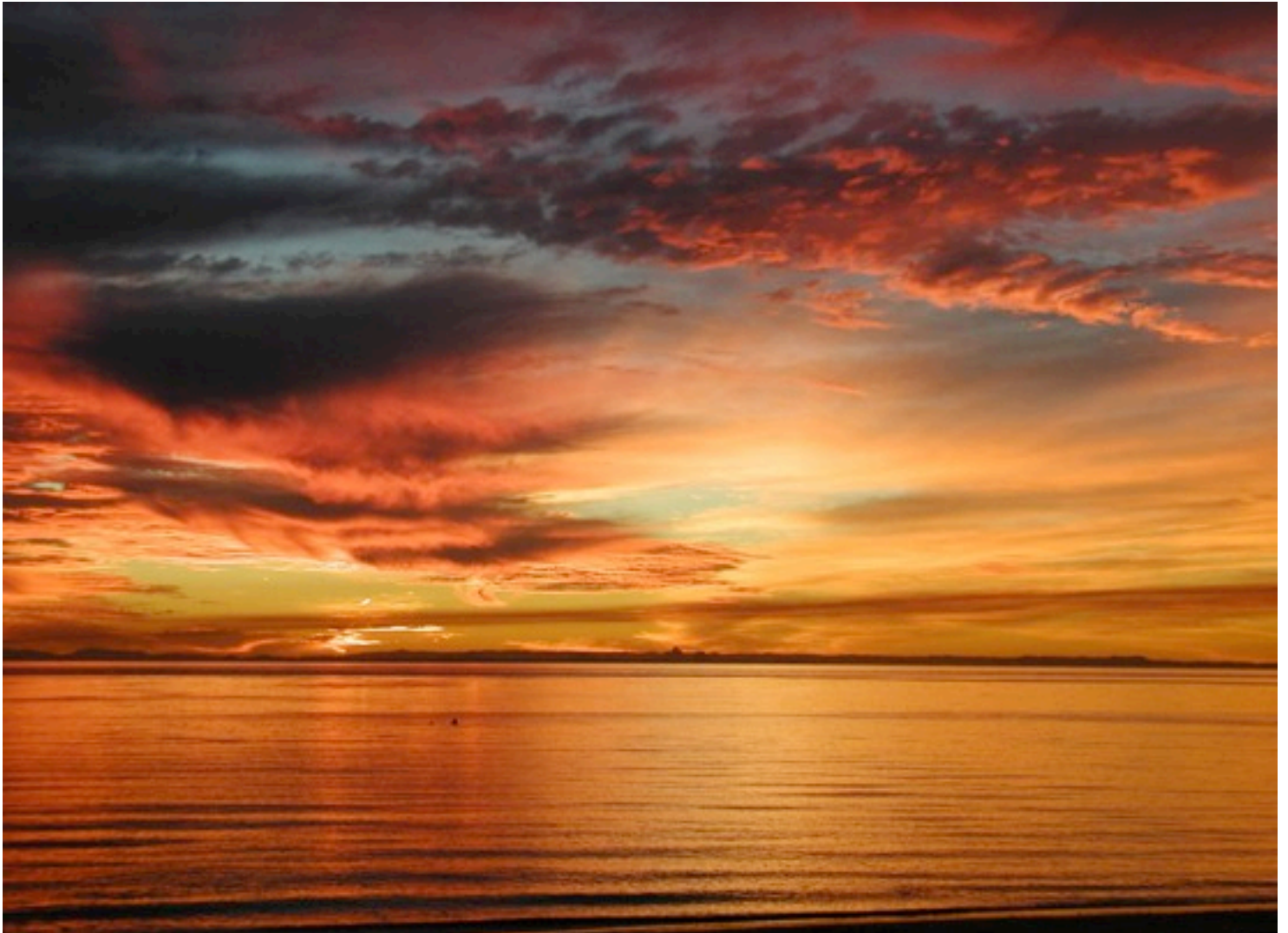
The work we are trying to do in MAS, the mission we are trying to carry out, and the vision we are trying to achieve are huge, long-term projects that cannot happen over night. The only possible way of achieving such a project is through constant and gradual effort that makes incremental progress and builds on each other. It is a large wheel that we are trying to turn and it takes a long period of time to start rolling and building momentum. On the other hand, gradualism may often be used to justify stagnation, laziness, minimal sacrifice, playing it "safe", staying in our comfort zone, or avoiding creativity, bold measures, and risks.

Gradualism cannot be an excuse for mediocrity!

The moderate understanding of "gradualism", the process of change and movement, requires steps to take place and motion to be constantly present. These steps may take time or they may be bold and quick, depending on the circumstances and the nature of the step. Gradualism does not refer to a pace of time; it refers to taking steps and a process. Some of the steps may be accomplished quickly with little effort. Some steps may be small and steady, while others will require significant time with a 100% effort.

### Focus Points

1. Did this case study resound with you? Or do you disagree with some points?
2. What tools can help us determine how fast or how slow, how bold or how small, we should move, as individuals and as a movement?
3. Are there any situations in which gradualism is not a moderate choice and is not called for?



## Case Study VI: Community Investment

Our community, MAS included, has invested so much in building institutions such as Islamic centers, Islamic schools, Qur'an institutes, and youth centers. Our spending goes mostly into buying real estate and making the properties operational. The tremendous reward in building a Masjid, as stated in the words of Prophet, makes it very easy to encourage people to donate. Many MAS chapters focus mostly on their centers and the number of Islamic centers are increasing right as we speak.

But aren't there many other areas that we need to invest in? For example, sustaining an intellectual effort to develop the understanding of Islam in the American context? Developing high-quality, not-for-profit staff and volunteers? Giving Islam in America a strong, charismatic web presence? Developing effective, well-trained youth workers and counselors? The investments that we need to make are beyond having a strong real estate presence.

But there are still many localities without Islamic centers. Islamic centers are the first step towards building a successful community. Isn't that what the Prophet started doing? Our community can't afford not to have thriving centers and Islamic schools. Yet unfortunately, we stop short of developing those places. We feel very comfortable spending millions on buildings, but close to nothing on employees who can make those buildings successfully functional. Not to mention all of the projects that are not at all associated with physical properties.

### Focus Points

1. To what degree do you agree or disagree that this is a problem in the community?
2. What kind of steps can we take as a community to find a moderate path between all of the needs of the community, both short-term and long-term, between properties and development?
3. Brainstorm with your team on several ideas or projects that you believe are a priority and would be a good step in achieving a higher level of community development.



## Case Study VII: Our Movement's Ideology

**Salman:** We are part of an American Islamic movement. Our identity, methodology, and approach should only stem from those two places: our religion, Islam, and our country, America. We have the Islamic sources, the Quran, and the tradition of our messenger, and we also have a whole wealth of experience and context from our country and society. This is the only way to be a relevant genuine Islamic movement.

**Aminah:** But wait! We can't just ignore the experience and legacy of the Islamic movement throughout history whether or not it took place in America. We can't ignore a wealth of experience developed by people who had very similar goals. Isn't this experience very useful and can be used to learn and build on? Are we abandoning a legacy of 1400 years including the very contemporary one? Aren't we regressing too much if we insist on starting from scratch, based on a relatively new history in America?

**Salman:** Yes, human experience is always useful. But the context is different and circumstances are different. We can't limit ourselves to a legacy that took place in a different context and during different times.

**Aminah:** Well, the Qur'an was revealed in a different context and during a different time; so was the tradition of the prophet. Using the same logic we should not rely on those as well.

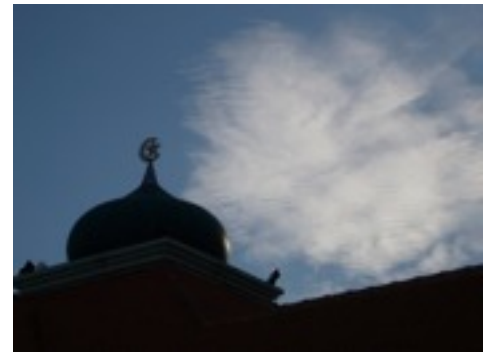
**Salman:** Of course not. The Qur'an and the tradition of the messenger (pbuh) are divine guidance and they are, by design, suitable for every place and context. There should be an effort to contextualize them and apply them in our very life.

**Aminah:** We should also be able to contextualize the legacy inspired by those sources using the same tools and process. We can't just take the experience of people so lightly--and not any people. In many countries and times before us, great scholars and leaders passed on to us a foundation that we can build on and start from. They, too, built on the Qur'an and the tradition of the messenger. As a matter of fact, our success as American Muslims relies on sticking to this legacy and learning from it and building on it. This legacy is still suitable for our time and we need to make a very strong case to depart from it!

**Salman:** Why limit myself to this legacy? It is a human experience and a different experience. We miss out on many opportunities and new approaches when we confine ourselves to a model and a legacy developed for a different time and place.

### Focus Points

1. Find out what your discussion members think about this case study and what they think is a moderate choice. Is the moderate choice necessarily an in-between approach? Careful!
2. What do you think is MAS' approach on this issue? Do you believe MAS' approach is a moderate and excellent one? Are there ways it can improve?
3. What steps can MAS take to reach a better approach, if you believe the approach is lacking?
4. Do you think Salman and Aminah will be able to work together, move forward, and find common ground despite their different views?



*Did you enjoy this episode's case studies? Think it might be fun to design your own?*

## **"Be Creative in Moderation" Contest!**

**Deadline: Midnight June 1, 2010**

Send entries to [contest@mastarbiya.org](mailto:contest@mastarbiya.org)

**The winning contestant will receive free admission to TAM 2010 in the fall and the winning entry will be showcased on the MAS Tarbiya website for national discussion**

Design your own case study by creating a challenging scenario that inspires discussion and questions on how to achieve moderation in our lives and experiences. Contestants may explore other ways of presenting the case studies, beyond the basic format in this episode. The case studies can incorporate a variety of media and tools, including videos, drawings, articles, audio, and other creative additions. The winning entries will be selected on the basis of relevancy to American Muslims, creativity of presentation, and how thoughtful and challenging the questions it raises are.



## Are we living in a culture of excess?

By Anees Shaikh (MAS-NY)

Clinical psychologist Jay Slosar's 2009 book, *The Culture of Excess: How America Lost Self-Control and Why We Need to Redefine Success*, is an analysis of the root causes for the extremes we see around us in America today. In this book synopsis, we highlight some of the key points of the book with the goal of helping us, as Muslims, understand and address the origins of excesses in our society. In many cases, we can find opportunities to apply Islamic concepts to address some of these problems, such as brotherhood, enjoining truth and justice, fairness and integrity in business transactions, kindness to family and neighbors, weighing the benefits of actions, and of course, moderation in all things. For more information about the book and the author, please visit <http://www.cultureofexcess.com>.

A sense of entitlement. Fantasies of success, beauty, or power. A belief that one is "special." Envy of others, or belief that others are envious. Arrogance and attitude. A manipulative interpersonal style. Does this sound like anyone you know?

This is the question posed near the beginning of J.R. Slosar's book, *The Culture of Excess*. Undoubtedly, we all know someone like this, more likely many people (including ourselves) who exhibit some of these tendencies. In his book, which is replete with detailed references to various research studies as well as Slosar's own observations, he describes today's age of excess: "Our expectations of immediacy are staggering. We lose patience quickly... We are overweight, spend and amass huge financial debt, and take excessive amounts of medications. And when we overdo it, we expect someone else to bail us out." Despite all of this focus on material gains, research shows that our wealth and material things do not really make us feel any better. For fun and pleasure, we turn to video games, extreme sports, watching sports, and reality shows, but "these are pursued with obsessions that border on addiction," writes Slosar. As the book discusses later, modern media fuels these obsessions, with leading news stories about the latest *American Idol* winner, or constant updates about the latest celebrity scandal.

Psychologists have used other phrases to describe today's generation such as "Generation Me," in which youth and young workers put themselves first in everything, resulting in overly impulsive behavior and a lack of self-control in their quest for "success." Slosar describes this lack of self-control: we take more than we need, we do not consider the effects of our actions, or engage in behavior with clearly undesirable consequences. He refers to a number of examples of a lack of self-control (or moderation) in society. One dramatic example is obesity, with roughly two thirds of adults overweight or obese, with obvious implication for future health-related problems. Another example is the growing prevalence of a psychiatric condition called "intermittent explosive disorder," characterized by outbursts that go far beyond anger, resulting in serious harm to people or property.

As we will discuss later, Slosar points to our economic era as a primary cause of the rapid decline in self-control, with its emphasis on deregulation. "We learn and believe that we can have anything we want, at any time, and that nothing should hold us back."

### *We all love "me"*

Slosar describes some of his experiences lecturing his college students: they walk out of the class at random, only to return later with food and drink; they arrive late, and then sit down and start talking with their friends; they read other books, or surf the web on their laptops. This apparent self-absorption, according to Slosar, demonstrates a level of narcissism that has grown to the point that it pervades our culture.

Narcissism is defined often as "self-love", and arises historically from the Greek myth of Narcissus, a handsome young man who encountered his own reflection in a pool of water, and became so self-absorbed that he ultimately perished. Being self-centered or egocentric is of course a human characteristic, which we balance over time with empathy and consideration for others. Narcissism arises with the lack of empathy, compassion, or remorse, and an inability to see the negative consequences of their actions. Research has shown that narcissists are less forgiving and tend to anger more quickly.

In his 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, social critic Christopher Lasch coined the term "cultural narcissism" which refers to "features and symptoms of narcissism in our day-to-day behavior" as explained by Slosar. This growing trend emphasizes immediacy, consumption, and self-love while deprecating self-control, self-reflection, and our ability to maintain focus and attention.

## Are we living in an culture of excess?

### *Deregulation and Middlemen*

One of the major impacts of the increase in cultural narcissism in the age of excess is in the business world, where manipulation of the financial sector (i.e., Wall Street) has reached new levels. For example, Slosar points out the way auditors and accountants regularly engage in "creative" accounting, and in trying to help companies avoid paying taxes, all with the tacit approval of boards of directors. As Slosar writes, company leaders are "apt to say defiantly: 'What's wrong with that?'" Even after disasters such as Enron, the increased regulation did not lead to sufficient auditing and accounting. The excessive risk-taking that led to failures of some of the biggest Wall Street companies, such as Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, and AIG is evidence of the lack of corporate self-control (Slosar refers to this as entrepreneurial narcissism).

In describing childhood growth, Slosar mentions that normal development is not possible without limits and boundaries. He writes, "balanced regulation is necessary to healthy growth and development", and the "same principle applies to markets. Adequate and balanced boundaries (regulations) are necessary and required for growth and maturity." Yet, the profit-only mission of corporations has resulted in dramatic economic deregulation over the last 20 years -- "deregulation is the linchpin for the culture of excess and nothing represents a culture of excess more than the active deregulators."

Slosar uses the example of the U.S. healthcare system extensively to discuss the rise of the "broker" role in modern markets that leads to so much waste and inefficiency. He writes, "In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a dramatic cost shifting occurred through managed care. Instead of the health care dollars going to doctors and hospitals, they went to the 'fiscal intermediary,' or in effect, a middleman." He relates the appeal of the "broker" jobs to the rise of cultural narcissism, saying there "will be fewer people seeking a professional career or vocation, and instead seeking the broker jobs where it is possible to get in the middle of large amounts of money and take out as much as you can for yourself."

### *Alternate realities and "I can do anything"*

In the book, Slosar mentions the well-documented phenomenal growth of time spent online by American teens. More than 80% play online games, more than 50% get their music online, and more than 75% read news online. In massively multiplayer games, exemplified by titles such as World of Warcraft, players interact using made-up characters in fictional adventures set in fantasy worlds. Slosar writes, "it is hard to understand how all this time spent in online virtual worlds cannot detract from our psychological development, a sense of who we are in relation to others and the world, and affect our external capacity for self-control." As many of us may have experienced, the book gives examples of how online activity changes the nature and dynamics of communication -- it is much easier to confront and challenge someone in email, but if asked to meet or talk directly, they are more likely to disappear. Slosar gives another amusing, yet indicative, example of a mother who asks her teenage daughter how her day was -- the teen says "ok." But if she texts her, her daughter sends her a much more complete version of her day. The virtual reality we often live in today is "characterized by immediacy, illusionary expectations, inflated self-concepts, a demand for a perfect image, and loss of privacy" -- all of these factors contribute to narcissistic tendencies.

The book also describes the changing sense of self that results from today's technological and economic forces -- these forces are leading to cultivation of a false self. As Slosar describes it, this false sense of self is necessary in modern society just to survive psychologically, even for good, healthy people. "I can sell anything," "You'll have it tomorrow," "I can do the job," are all examples of the exaggerations that are asserted both as children are developed with a no-holds-barred philosophy, and in the professional world where these claims show up on resumes. Slosar writes, "When you keep adding up and increasing the number of false selves, the total makes up a false society." This exaggerated self also puts extreme pressure on people, particularly at the professional level. "... we live on heightened alert to avoid mistakes. This leads to more cover up, denial, and partial rationalizations (excuses), and over time a more rigid personality." This rigidity prevents us from acknowledging mistakes.

The false sense of self ultimately involves self-deception, according to Slosar. Matching what we think of ourselves to what is portrayed to the external world often requires manipulation, or lying. Most people do not lie outright, however -- instead they withhold information, exaggerate, or embellish to get their way. Slosar cites an ethics study done in 2002, which concludes, "The evidence is that a willingness to cheat has become the norm and that parents, teachers, coaches, and even religious educators have not been able to stem the tide. The scary thing is that so many kids are entering the workforce to become corporate executives, politicians, airplane mechanics and nuclear inspectors with the dispositions and skills of cheaters and thieves."

## Are we living in an culture of excess?

### *Dumbing down*

In one of the chapters in *The Culture of Excess*, Slosar makes an interesting connection between the effects of narcissism and declining self-control on our ability to think analytically and make informed decisions. Computers and the Internet bring huge volumes of information at our fingertips, but we are losing the ability to read and integrate the information, and we cannot tell what is accurate when we rely so completely on screen media. In the end, Slosar writes, we make terrible decisions with poor outcomes, especially when this lack of analytical ability is combined with our own biases.

Slosar explains that poor math and science scores among American students (signs of declining analytical ability), are not because we are somehow not smart enough, but rather that "we have become uninterested in the type of thinking required for math and science. A culture of excess dominated by screen media directs us outward to novelty, fantasy, and entertainment. Math cannot compete."

In another section of the book, Slosar discusses the new implications of the age-old adage: "image is everything." People's images today are driven by their own sense of what it means to be successful: "Our constant world of fantasy, images, and heroes presented through screen media and social media reflects the underlying cultural narcissism... The images we hold and pursue become our cultural definition of success."

The media fuels our obsessions with these images -- pop culture is reported as important news, which in turn changes the definition of success. It comes to mean becoming famous through media exposure or being "discovered." This is evident when we see that, as Slosar notes, today's youth would rather watch a reality show than anything with more substance. "The fixation on pop culture, celebrity, and star athletes represents cultural trends toward fantasies of immediate success and social narcissism."

### *Generation We: A Solution*

In the concluding chapter of book, Slosar, notes that Americans are finally seeing the full impact of the culture of excess. The economic crisis we find ourselves in today has been brewing for a long time, with Americans having lost self-control and living way beyond their means. The increase in cultural narcissism manifests itself in a greater sense of entitlement and grand expectations of success. Slosar uses the example of business leaders who embody the sense of entitlement and unrealistic expectations. Despite losing \$27 billion in 2008, when Merrill Lynch was sold to Bank of America that year, 700 Merrill executives received a total of \$3.6 billion as an early bonus before the sale completed. If this had been spread across all employees, each person could have received \$91,000. Slosar argues that this sense of entitlement by business leaders (which is really nothing but greed), will be stopped only by people "that demand self-control in business leaders through enforced regulation." Parents also have role to play to curb their childrens' sense of entitlement in a time when kids expect their parents to buy them everything they want. In some cases over-regulation may be necessary to get their full attention so that they develop enough self-control.

To really address the narcissistic trends that lead our society to less and less self-control, Slosar argues that we must develop a new generation that adopts a new view and process of attaining success. This new view is more connected with culture and more inclusive, with less sense of entitlement, more realistic expectations, and discipline to regulate our own behavior and the marketplace. Slosar refers to this new generation as "Generation We." In simple terms, moving from "me" to "we" may seem to be the difference between individualism and collectivism, but Slosar writes that the issue is larger and more complex than that. Below, we discuss some of the key changes that Slosar outlines for a successful transition to "Generation We."

The first characteristic of a healthier generation is a redefinition of success, in which people have a different form of self-definition and identity -- a sense of self that is distinctly separate from accumulation of wealth and material things. Today, as Slosar writes, "a successful person is a wealthy person and monetary success drives self-definition." This requires that we create a model of success that is based on notions of good work, done with consistency and competency, rather than wealth alone. Today, our emerging young workers find that success (i.e., making money) is achieved by becoming a broker, avoiding spending too much time in a profession.

## Are we living in an culture of excess?

The redefinition of success comes also with a new view of *how* people attain success. The shortcuts and unfairness inherent in today's pathways to success (e.g., favoritism, cronyism, nepotism) must be minimized. Those who profit by deceit and manipulation, along with those who stand by rather than enforcing regulations, should be "public enemy number one," according to Slosar. "A *Generation We* must return fair play to the workplace and hold accountable those who have dishonestly profited... only increased regulation and enforcement of the markets will address this underlying psychological condition that is part of the roots of cultural narcissism."

Another important change that Slosar mentions is a revitalization of quantitative thinking skills. "Today's prevalence of screen media promotes a certain kind of thinking. This thinking is more immediate, impulsive, and faster... Children and adults have trouble sitting and listening to a speaker for too long without getting on their laptop or cell phone." The rise of this sort of "technological thinking" comes at the expense of more traditional quantitative thinking, which requires a more sustained, intentional, and focused process to fully comprehend information and solve problems. Slosar does not claim that use of computers or technology is bad, but rather that, "quantitative thinking will decrease impulsive thinking and behavior" which is required to regulate mood and establish self-control. Parents clearly have a role to play in fostering quantitative thinking and limiting screen media, as well as regulating time spent on social networking or text messaging.

Slosar summarizes the challenges of *Generation We* as needing to:

- adopt a healthier view of self-identity
- increase quantitative thinking in order to promote mood regulation and self-control
- redefine success using measurements of quality of life
- change the emphasis of what media reports (i.e., avoiding the blend of entertainment with news)
- challenge the existing economic philosophies and the attempts to further anti-government views

There is indeed going to be a conflict between *Generation Me* and *Generation We* -- the resistance to change will be significant according to Slosar. But as he says, "only through such an ambitious challenge can we evolve from a culture of excess into one with a definition of success that maximizes the full depth of human potential."



## The Straight Path Campaign: A conversation

*Nancy A. Khalil is a Ph.D. candidate in Social Anthropology at Harvard University. She also conducts research for the Muslims in Boston Survey, part of Harvard's Islam in the West Project. Prior to starting at Harvard, she worked as a Muslim Chaplain at Wellesley College. This article is an excerpt of a longer paper by Nancy, entitled A Terrorfied Community.*

I chose to interview Hossam AlJabri, the Executive Director (ED) of the Muslim American Society (MAS), a national organization with over 40 chapters across the country, regarding the recent implementation of the Straight Path Campaign, a new MAS initiative created "to address the issue of extremism in our community."<http://islampath.org/about-straight-path> As a current Board member of the Boston chapter, former Youth Director for four years of the Boston chapter, I have been involved with MAS for just under a decade. The majority of my direct engagement with MAS is with the Boston chapter. With the Straight Path Campaign being a nationally directed initiative, I thought by providing distance (under directive of national not local leadership) coupled with direct involvement (the national Executive Director happens to be a Boston chapter member), it would be a good case study for my context and interests.

MAS's Straight Path Campaign website <http://islampath.org/about-straight-path> asks and responds,

Why is this initiative important, and what are its key goals?

1. Muslim youth across America are exposed to extremist ideas, whether through interaction with radical groups, or through the internet.
2. The goals are to (a) provide people with an alternative way to express themselves aside from violence; (b) provide young people with positive tools for social change; (c) educate people about the high cost of extremism for their communities and for themselves.
3. Extremism is a big problem in many countries around the world. It is also highly contagious. This is our chance to address it early on, before it becomes an even bigger problem in our own country.

My first question to the ED inquired as to the inspiration behind this Campaign. He said that while its launch was not until late 2009, the idea was deliberated since 2008. Leaders in MAS recognized a potentially growing trend of individual American Muslim youth expressing violent attitudes, about to be drawn into extremist groups, or already engaged with them. He specifically mentioned the five youth that went to Pakistan at the end of 2009 and left a video for their parents expressing extremist leanings. The youth were arrested in December after their parents alerted the Council on American-Islamic Relations who then alerted U.S. officials who in turn contacted Pakistani officials. The youth are currently on trial in Pakistan on terrorism related charges. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/terrorism-trial-us-suspects-pakistan/story?id=10247324> He said there is a "need for the Muslim community to take a stand." Some of the other reasons he gave were that

- Muslims need to do our part to make the message of moderation a clearly available message to youth who may be drifting
- Pressure from the media that the Muslim community is not doing anything
- The program is for the larger public, not just Muslims
- Some youth were expressing interest in and not a disdain for terrorism

I probed him further on his point regarding media pressure and he proceeded to explain that the media was not necessarily interested in pressuring the community, but it was interested in a 'sensational story,' and Muslims' absence from the anti-terrorism narrative provided one.

(continued on next page)

## The Straight Path Campaign: A conversation (continued)

Throughout our conversation, he placed a strong emphasis on youth. When explaining the problem of terrorism, he said that it was not a problem inspired by Islam, but by other factors such as: youth liking to rebel, the young age comprising intensified fantasizing, and the challenges facing our country of youth committing acts of violence. He said, “I do not think this is the sole responsibility of the Muslim community. Some youth will use faith as a pedestal on their track to violence, but they will use other things too. It’s a problem facing us as a larger society and a concern for many people, so we can’t ignore it.” He continued to emphasize that he does not believe it is the number one problem the Muslim community in America is facing but he believes there needs to be input and a case needs to be made to the youth that Islam stands against acts of violence and extremism.

We talked about several things that space will not allow me to discuss in detail, but of them were the target audience of the Campaign (mostly people that fit into marginalized and minority categories) and whether or not the organization was abreast to all of the research reports written on this topic (they were to many). There are, however, two other points we did discuss that deserve some attention. The first is our discussion regarding MAS’s identity. Since I first became involved with MAS, the organization used spirituality as its central motivator to engage and involve Muslims into varying societal issues. I wondered how the Straight Path Campaign fit in with MAS’s mission ‘To Move People to Strive for God-Consciousness, Liberty and Justice, and to Convey Islam with Utmost Clarity’ and its vision of having ‘A Virtuous and Just American Society.’ I particularly asked him his thoughts on placing an emphasis through the Campaign on what MAS is not, instead of focusing on initiatives that promote what MAS is about as defined in the mission and vision. In response, the ED insisted that the Campaign is not what MAS is about. In fact, none of the people affiliated with MAS or involved in MAS activities had ever been connected to any acts of terror. He also interestingly noted that it is quite common for people to explain their identity denying what they are not, and not simply affirming who they are. As an example he provided the declaration of faith in Islam, ‘There is no god but God....’ He also talked about the discourse surrounding what defines a ‘good Muslim’ as another example of defining identity through renunciation, citing a common description, ‘a good Muslim is someone who does not drink, fornicate, steal, lie, etc.’

The last point I want to include from our conversation is the ED’s acknowledgement that terrorism is not a new phenomenon globally but is relatively so in the U.S. He said that while he recognizes there are other contributing factors, he “know[s] for a fact that MAS played a crucial role in keeping the Muslim American community much more moderate.” In listing what he feels are positive impacts that will result from this campaign, his comments centered around benefits to the Muslim community: a) Muslims will feel comfortable talking about the problem of terrorism in public if Muslim organizations have initiatives against them. b) Muslims will feel that are doing something about the problem of terrorism. c) Muslims will gain an emotional distance from the problem by addressing it because it will cease to be about ‘me’ and instead become about ‘the other.’ This will keep Muslims from feeling emotionally cornered and will empower them as Americans. d) (the final point I will mention although he listed several others) that it will indicate where the Muslim leadership officially stands on this issue to Muslims who are not engaged with Muslim organizations so they do not have the media as their only source of information (which, he implied, would encourage these Muslims to further distance themselves from the organized groups).

Many of the ED’s comments and responses were not a surprise to me. In fact, most of what he said I expected to hear. The comments that I found most striking were the positive impacts he believed the campaign would have – almost all of them were impacts on the Muslim community. By the end of our conversation the purpose of the Straight Path Campaign was presented not as a campaign rooting out extremists and terrorists, but instead as a benefit for all Muslims in America. While my concerns remain regarding the Campaign (and the ED recognized them as well), the interview and essay provided an opportunity that allowed me to synergize how Muslim leaders are using the anti-terrorism narrative pro-actively instead of re-actively. It became evident that the project is not about defending Muslims, but from the leaders’ perspective, it is primarily about empowering Muslims.

# Moderation and the US: Finding a Middle Path

By Najeeb Kamil, MAS Bay Area, CA

## Abstract

The United States of America has been considered, at one time or another since its inception, one of the most advanced countries in the world. Countries around the world have marveled and tried to emulate these advancements in governance, economics, legislation, and technology. Unfortunately, this progress has concealed the societal problems and oppression affecting different segments of its citizens. One of the major factors contributing to the negative effects on society has been the lack of moderation in planning and implementing growth through all facets of what is now the United States. Moderation is the quality of striving to achieve an excellent middle point between extreme points, all of which are deficient or detrimental. This concept of moderation, found in the teachings of Islam, has the potential to remedy some of the existing problems in society and to help avoid oppressive side-effects of policies in the future of the United States.

## Introduction

The United States of America is used as the standard for progress and democracy for the rest of the world with governments striving to emulate its systems. Its real and perceived power has made it the de facto leader of the world resulting in influencing world policies in all seven continents. What is largely ignored or hidden are the negative effects of this progress, whether on individuals, groups, communities, and even society. One of the major reasons for these negative impacts is lack of moderation in implementing laws and policies for progress. Advancement in the United States has never taken a holistic approach and negative impacts have almost always been accepted as long as the economic advantages are present. Many American historians have gone as far as saying that human suffering is a price a civilization must pay to advance (Zinn, 1980). Moderation is the quality of striving to achieve an excellent middle point between extreme points, all of which are deficient or detrimental. The concept of moderation must be utilized as a guide when moving forward with any progress or advancement, regardless of the arena. Moderation is a key characteristic of Islam and has deep theological roots in the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Mohammad. This moderation requires for individuals, communities, and nations to find the "mid between two bad extremes" before acting (Saad, 2006). If the different segments of the United States adopted the idea of moderation as espoused in Islam, there is a real potential in

decreasing negative impacts and remedying some of the ills that affect the society and country.

## Moderation and Health

In the United States, approximately 64% of Americans are overweight and 30% are obese (Close & Schoeller, 2006). The two major factors attributed to obesity are the frequency of eating out and the large portion sizes. These large portions have shown in many studies to promote overeating and are usually offered at what seems to be economical prices. Many fast-food restaurants have individual portions that can feed at least three normal people and there are still many that carry a 'super-size' option for an additional cost. Not only is overeating a problem, but the kind of foods that are eaten by Americans at unhealthy rates also is a problem. Red meats are readily available at affordable prices in the US, and many Americans find themselves eating meat mostly and rarely eating vegetables. Moderation in eating and balancing the types of foods we consume can help in remedying or lessening the health issues related to overeating and obesity. In addition, the practice of fasting in Islam can also be a healthy way to discipline our eating habits. There is a well-known saying of Prophet Mohammad where he advises Muslims to eat so that one-third of the stomach is full of food, one-third full of water, and one-third full of air. American Muslims need to return to this tradition of moderation in eating and drinking so that they can then spread this core concept to the rest of society. The potential impact on society is huge and will go beyond just the health of our country, but save billions of dollars in weight-loss programs and medical expenses related to overeating.

## Moderation and Entertainment

Entertainment in Islam has been discussed and debated for many centuries including amongst the American Muslim community. Though there are still many differences of opinion on what is allowed and what is not, there is a consensus that there should be moderation in how Muslims get involved in entertainment. Muslims are allowed to have fun and enjoy themselves, and to not commit any immoral and unethical acts in the process. On the other hand, entertainment in the United States appears to have no such guidelines or limits. The entertainment industry actually competes to stretch and go beyond the limits of morality in their efforts to increase viewership and ratings. Due to this lack of moderation, there have been numerous negative impacts on society. Parents have difficulty understanding why their children are exhibiting certain behaviors and are oblivious of the great influencing power of television. In addition, use of exorbitant amounts of money is used for advertising, which has resulted in a generation of materialistic consumers. Much of the content on television promotes consumption, constantly sending messages that material goods and

happiness are related (Vega & Roberts, 2009). Moderation from the Islamic perspective can bring balance to the entertainment industry and decrease the effects of materialism. It has the potential of changing the way individuals look at entertainment, possibly transforming it from an industry focused on the base desires to an industry focusing on the mind and heart.

## Moderation and the Economy

During the bid to secure the Democratic presidential nomination, Barak Obama commented in many of his speeches on how financial institutes and complacent politicians created a "ethic of greed" that led to the foreclosure crisis and the economic downturn the United States is experiencing today. In an effort to make more and more money, financial institutes came up with creative types of transactions, such as the selling and buying portions of home loans. In addition, certain discriminatory practices were utilized to give out home loans where minorities were given unsafe and predatory loans while others were not. With the financial industry in ruins, executives were still getting millions of dollars in bonuses while the nation watched in horror and disbelief. The Islamic economic system is based on the core concept of moderation and a comprehensive study on the Islamic economic system can benefit the financial industry in the United States so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. Many banks around the world have already adopted many Islamic practices in their financial dealings and Islamic banking is growing steadily at a rate of 10-15% per year with signs of consistent future growth (Cihak & Hesse, 2008). American Muslims have a large contribution to make to the American financial system using the guidelines of moderation.

## Moderation and Technology

Technology has made life easier for individuals all across the United States and the world. People are able to communicate with each other across long distances with ease and information is so accessible that all it requires are a few finger movements on a cell phone. There is a common saying that "Information is power", but what is usually ignored is that information can also be detrimental. Cell phones are a prime example of how technology and information can be used to ease and better life, but can also be destructive. These days, teens want the newest smart phone on the market with unlimited texting and data access. Oblivious parents go ahead and succumb to their teen's requests and get them one. Little do they know about what is going on at the high schools with cell phones. Teens are taking pictures of themselves and others and sending them to their friends who then send them to their friends, disseminating photos and videos to hundreds of people within minutes. There have been some recent cases where a teen has sent a revealing picture of herself to a boyfriend, who then sent it to his

friends, and so on, until everyone at the school had that picture. This teen was harassed about that picture until she could not take it any longer and changed schools. Students at that school also had pictures of her and the harassment continued until she committed suicide. Though the result in this story is quite extreme, the dissemination of pictures, videos, and gossip by cell phone is a pervasive problem. Moderation in this arena would include some type of education about progress in ethics and morality coupled with the progress in technology. Technology is advancing in leaps and bounds, but the education on how to use this technology for good is lagging behind. Moderation has a key role to play in technological advancement.

## Conclusion

Moderation is the quality of striving to achieve an excellent middle point between extreme points, all of which are deficient or detrimental. Though just a few examples were mentioned to demonstrate how moderation as a core concept in Islam could benefit

the United States and its citizens, there are many areas and issues that moderation can play a key role in. It is up to the American Muslims to implement moderation in all facets of their lives so that the rest of society can see the living example of what moderation looks like, and it is up to the American Muslim community to show the United States how to find the middle path.

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THE END

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