THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT's AEMS Podcast

Transcript for Episode 15:
Well-being and Podcasts
Guest: Walid Darab from Greed for Ilm
Date of Interview: 07/15/19
Host: Amina Derbi

Amina: Welcome everyone, you are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of AEMS, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought.

You can listen to this podcast on Stitcher, Google Play, Spotify, iTunes or Apple podcasts, CastBox and Messy.FM as well as Podcast Mirror. The observations and conclusions featured in this podcast represent the speakers' own personal views not the organization's. The theme for this season is wellbeing.

And now we are very excited to introduce our next guest, Walid Darab, the host and creator of the very popular *Greed for Ilm* podcast. With over 300,000 followers on Facebook who were attracted to his message of raising personal awareness to become better individuals, whether through religious knowledge or non-religious knowledge, he started a podcast to promote this cause which now has over 210 episodes and continues to grow with top-ratings. He's interviewed so many wonderful individuals and top speakers, including imams, scholars, and journalists. People including Imam Suhaib Webb, Yasmin Mogahed, and our very own Dr. Johnathan Brown who just taught at IIIT Summer Student Program.

So, without further ado, assalamu 'alaikum, Walid! How are you doing today?

Walid: Walaikum Assalam! I'm doing great, thank you for having me on.

Amina: Thank you so much for joining us! We're so excited to have you on the show today.

Walid: Likewise, thank you.

Amina: Wonderful. So, I'm going to dive into our questions for you. So, you are the host and producer of the very popular *Greed for Ilm* podcast. Ilm, for our listeners who don't know, is the Arabic word for knowledge. Can you tell us a bit more about why you started the podcast and the significance of the name?

Walid: Absolutely, absolutely. That's actually a pretty good question. When I started out, I myself, like probably many, many people growing up in this country — in the U.S or, you know, the "Western world" — find that we had the desire sometimes, or at least I remember having it, to go abroad to learn your religious knowledge, your religious sciences and stuff like that. But, at the same time, you know you have work, you have family, you have different things that come up and, you know, that kind of, in a way, can bog you down from pursuing those things.

So, I remember reaching out to a family member, a cousin of mine who was attending Islamic school here in the U.S, and I asked him for a favor. I said, "Hey, can you —" and this was back in like 2011 or 2012, and I asked him if he could do me a favor and go to his teacher and ask his teacher on my behalf, would it be a good idea to kind of just let go of life in America and just go overseas and, you know, learn your religion? And then come back after a decade or whatever. That was my train of thought back then.

So surprisingly, when my cousin got back to me he said, "Actually my teacher said do not —" at the time I had a wife and a kid and all that, and it's more important for me to stay here in the safety of the U.S. Back then the whole conflict in the Middle East was starting to brew up and they knew that. So, they were like don't even go there, just stay here and you can find people here in the U.S. that have already gone there and come here, set up these type of methods where you can actually do it online. You don't even need to attend someplace physical per se.

So, I started thinking about it and I was like, you know what, I'm gonna go and do that. So, I started reaching out, looking around, and at the same time I couldn't find anything on iTunes catering to the Muslim youth growing up. Like, I'm first generation, I'm talking about the kids growing up. There's so much, I guess you could call it, "trash" on the radio that's really a waste of time to listen to. I mean I personally haven't listened to the radio in, like, fifteen years. I don't even play the radio, I love podcasts. On iTunes, the only thing I could find under the Islamic genre was things that were like *tajweed* or lectures or something like that. Nothing, kind of, for the everyday common Muslim individual trying to just make what's happening around them seem relevant to them from the Islamic point of view.

So, I was like, alright I'll just create one, you know, funny enough. And the name I chose, *Greed for Ilm*, like you mentioned, ilm is the Arabic word for knowledge, was I found that in order to gain any type of knowledge in anything, right? Like the base should be, you should have this passion for it first, right? And I know many people where their parents kind of push them into religious studies young. And then when they get older, they're like they don't want anything to do with it. You know? I'm more of the point where you want to encourage it but not necessarily force it, right? You have to play like a psychological game with your child, and get them to like it. So the whole name of *Greed for Ilm* is almost kind of like a spin because "greed" is kind of viewed as like a negative word. But, I remember I think I was reading a hadith where the Prophet peace be upon him said that you should be with two people. One is one who is wealthy and gives his money to the needy, and then there's the other one who is like knowledgeable and teaches people, right? He passes down that knowledge. So, I kind of just made a flip on that and just said "oh Greed for Ilm" and I just stuck with it.

Amina: Okay, well wonderful. It's a very interesting name and like you mentioned, it's an interesting juxtaposition between greed, which you know typically would have- some would say, a negative connotation. But then with Ilm. If you think about it, you know if you have a thirst for knowledge then that's actually very positive.

Walid: Absolutely.

Amina: You started a Facebook page towards the end of 2011 with the goal to raise personal awareness to become better individuals, whether it's through religion or not. With over 300,000 followers, you started a podcast to further promote that cause. Why do you think so many

individuals were attracted to the idea of bettering themselves and increasing their human development?

Walid: I think that's innate. I feel like naturally people just want to do good or are inclined to better themselves and not be in this rut, right? Whatever the rut is, whether it's mental, they're on their job or daily, they have some type of depression, whatever. They obviously would like to be happier and be better. Like you said, in 2011 that's one of the first things I did. I created the Facebook page, and the podcast came I think a year or two later. The activity on the Facebook page really surprised me. There's a mass amount of people that are just attracted to you know, whether it is miniscule like I'm just sharing a hadith, or I'm sharing a quote, you know something like that to kind of help motivate somebody. I think it is innate in the people to actually want to better themselves. So, in whatever way that is, even social media. And obviously, we can only do what we're capable of. So, I'm not a scholar. For example, like you mentioned some of the people I interviewed for the podcast- I'm not at their level. What my thing was to quote on quote "contribute" to this overall kind of betterment of the human race, so to speak is to provide a platform for them.

So, it's kind of like I'm giving them the mic, and whoever listens to my podcast or goes to our Facebook page will see it and hear it. It's kind of like providing that platform is the way I chose to do it. I actually think it's again, go back on what I said initially. I feel like it's innate within us to be better and not be innate. [chuckles] I mean think about it if I feel sad, the thing I want to do is feel happy. So, it's like, you see some people they start shopping, or they start eating right? They have these like things that they do that can actually worsen the issue, but the overall intent is to become happy. Even though it is a temporary thing and in long term that's bad, but initially they just want to be happy. They just don't know how to get that long-term happiness, right? So yeah, I hope that answered your question.

Amina: Oh, it definitely does! It definitely does, and I think one of the great values added through your podcast is that it does serve as a convener for all these different speakers who come from different fields, different perspectives, and it's a sharing of knowledge. An integration of knowledge, so you get different forms of it. I think that's part of why the podcast is so successful. Our next question for you is that podcasting can serve as both a formal and informal tool for education. Where do you see yours fitting in and why?

Walid: Oh, [chuckles] absolutely informal, and I'll say this. I- when I started the podcast, my best friend- and actually, I think I mentioned this in episode 100. He actually interviews me and he brought up the idea of me starting a podcast. I said well you know, what am I going to talk about? That's the thing. When you start a podcast you have to have a "what am I going to talk about". He said man, you have a lot to talk about. Just get in front of a mic and start recording. And now we're like 200 plus episodes later, right? It is absolutely informal, because it's just me. I say it many times in the episodes. I'm not a Charlie Rose, right? This isn't 20/20. I have interviewed a lot of people where they have asked me prior to interviewing them, "can I get a list of questions?" Which is normal, when you consider a bunch of questions. I would literally- depending on the person- would either say, "I don't have a list of questions" or I'll say "Give me some time", and I'll start writing the questions down, you know? Because I want it to be a free form conversation. Like if you and I were sitting at a coffee shop or just started talking, right? And I find that- not only am I like that, but at the same time I got so many people replying back-whether it's tweets or emails or whatever. Listeners that say that they like that "down to earth" feel of the podcast, right?

Amina: Definitely.

Walid: That's just the way I am and that's just the way I've kept it. In fact I actually- I mean there's- I mean I have a bunch of over 200- so I have so many different stories where I've tried to do it formally and then I've messed up, like absolutely trashed the episode. It was just- it wasn't good from my delivery point, you know? But whenever it's informal I can just flow and go with it.

Amina: Yeah, I think also informal means they're more like you said, accessible to people sometimes. It's more down to earth, like you said and so it's easier for people to connect with it and listen in.

Walid: And another thing I want to add to that real quick is how social media has taken over almost every minute of people's attention nowadays. Everybody is trying to go down this path of everything has to be perfect on social media, right? Like the picture has to be perfect, the video I posted has to be perfect, right? So everybody's doing these multi multi takes before they actually post something, right? I just, you know, I don't do that because that's not how we are. We don't you know,- yes if you're doing a mass production or whatever-cool. But the average individual is not a mass production type of delivery, right? It's just "do it", and that's what I do. I just- we talk. And if it you know, there are times where I'll like cut out some. On postproduction you cut stuff out. Like oh we went off tangent over here, I'll cut it out. That's not a problem. But the way that I engage people and talk with people? There's no "formality" to it. It's literally like we're just two friends talking.

Amina: As it should be, right? [Chuckles]

Walid: I 100% believe that.

Amina: Me too. Same, same. And so your podcast has covered such a wide variety of topics, including education. So, I just was wondering to what extent has education policy or public policy come up in your conversations with your guests?

Walid: It has, like the guests that you mentioned in the beginning. There's- I forgot his name. He's an author, he's also a professor.

Amina: Was it Johnathan Brown?

Walid: No, so there's another professor. I think his name is Henry something. From Canada. He has a very strong view on the current education system, and how colleges are out just to make money. So there have been discussions on different point of views, but overall I would say it's probably a smaller point, right? When it comes to policy per say. Rather than talking about just how to do certain things, right? So like if the youth, for example. And a lot of questions I do ask is, if there's somebody listening to this podcast let's say in a country where- and by the way to kind of go back. The reason that I don't have video podcasts is because it's more accessible in audio format around the world- to download an mp3 rather than the whole video. In terms of like spotty internet and stuff, so that's why I've had actually people from like Palestine, and Myanmar, and places that are like listening, right? Because it's easier for them to consume that because it's less bandwidth, so I just stuck to the audio. Yeah, I mean the percentage of discussions over education policy or public policy has been the smaller fraction of it.

Amina: That's very interesting, very interesting. And so also in the past few years, podcasts have really taken off as an information sharing and communication tool. As I know, you're very much aware of that, of course. And I'm sure our listeners are as well. How do you think they can best be used to promote higher levels of empathy and well-being?

Walid: Well it comes down to the content, right? And the message, so like what are you pushing out there? And I take myself, for example. I'm pushing out there this *Greed for Ilm* podcast and these episodes. If there's been somebody who's been listening for the majority of the episodes and they get an idea of how, I am. They know- I mean there's been episodes where I've cried on the episode, right? For example, I had Sami Yusuf, I don't know if you're familiar with him.

Amina: Oh, yes! Yes!

Walid: I've had him on twice and I've actually ended up meeting him in person at a concert here in Maryland, and the third episode was documenting me meeting him. But also, how he was interacting with his fans. One of the fans was blind. It was like this young kid, who was blind. It was probably like an 8, 9 year old boy. I'm just sitting in the back waiting to meet him but I'm like letting all these other people kind of like bum-rush him. Because I mean, I've already talked to him. These people, you know paid money to see him so I just kind of stood in the background. But, I'm watching Sami Yusuf interact with this kid, and it was absolutely amazing. Like the respect, the time he gave, you know he kissed the boy on the cheek and all of that. So, as I'm describing this to the listeners, I ended up crying. It brought tears to my eyes. So that episode went out, and then I started getting people emailing me about that specific- I mean that episode was like- I probably got a lot of feedback from. Positive feedback! Like, "you brought me to tears" right? And just thinking about that, because I really described how Sami Yusuf- I mean there are a lot of artists and musicians and people like that in the entertainment business that don't give people the time of day. I'm too busy, this and that. But this guy, I mean absolutely my admiration for him went sky high. But it's how you deliver the message, right?

Again, I feel you can deliver empathy and stress these- like wellbeing like you mentioned and stuff like that if you are, in my view, informal type of delivery. You know, when I'm listening to Charlie Rose, who's more of a formal person, I don't get any sense- I just get a monotoned- I don't get any- you know my heart, my feelings don't change. But if I hear someone who had an intonation behind his voice, you know like, I feel his inflection. I feel his heart, right? I build a connection to that. That's how I am. Like I don't- I feel like the best thing to do is not only is it your content, but it's how you deliver it. And there's nothing wrong because initially when I started- if you could listen to my first couple episodes- it's embarrassing. Because I tried to be on script, and it just seemed so robotic, that I hate to listen to it now. I'm just like, no. It's like cringeworthy but once I started opening up and getting used to it, people actually loved it. And I mean, there are people that you know- I had this one girl from Iraq reach out to me. And thanked me so much for all of the Sami Yusuf episodes, because it made her feel like she was there, right? And she's like in some you know- she described it being like, you know, horrible house and you know, doesn't have anything. Spotty internet, this and that. And I actually felt- I mean that's why I was doing it. For those people. So, I actually felt very, very happy. You know? Which- again, I hope that addressed your question.

Amina: Oh, it definitely does. It definitely does. It sounds like authenticity plays a huge role here. It's an authentic space. It doesn't feel like there's some type of, you know, a fakeness to it. Or some type of, you know, encroachment from above. It needs to come from below, it needs to come from

the heart, and should make people have a sense of belonging. Like, the girl that you mentioned. I think what you're describing there is she felt like she was there and she felt like she belonged there, in that space. And so, that's very powerful.

Walid: Absolutely. I mean, a robot isn't empathetic, you know? If you have a robotic voice, and a robotic delivery. No- I mean, I just. No. I mean I can go on like an hour, you know about- an hour rant about that type of stuff, but that's just not what I do.

Amina: We appreciate that so much Walid, and thank you very much for your time today. We wish you all the best with all future endeavors and can't wait to tune into your next episode!

Walid: Thank you so much, it's my pleasure. Thank you for having me on.

Amina: Asalamu'alaykum!

Walid: Wa'alaikam asalam!

[Theme Music]

Amina: As mentioned last season, IIIT is currently accepting applications for its Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Master's degree program in partnership with American University. The International Training and Education Program – Advancing Education in Muslim Societies – also known as ITEP–AEMS – is a unique opportunity to earn a Master's degree in international education and training with focus on Muslim societies from a reputable university like American University. This program can be completed in one year and it is thirty credits!

For more information or if you are interested in applying, please visit www.iiit.org, then you can scroll to the bottom and you'll find the announcement.

Thank you all for listening. To stay up-to-date on everything happening with the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, otherwise known as AEMS, please follow IIIT on Twitter (@IIITfriends) and on Instagram (@iiit_insta). You won't want to miss our next episode. If you have any questions for us, or would like to join the conversation, please reach out to me! My email is amina@iiit.org. As always, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!