

THE MORAL COURAGE PROJECT

Individuality that serves community

New York University
Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service

"Few are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change."

-- Robert F. Kennedy

The Moral Courage Project is founded by Irshad Manji, renowned author, filmmaker and Muslim reformer.

Manji's challenges to fellow Muslims—key, she believes, to Islam's long-term health—have prompted strong reactions. They range from recognition of her bravery to accusations of betrayal to threats of death.

As Director of the Moral Courage Project, Manji leverages the lessons of her journey, combines them with interdisciplinary scholarship and teaches emerging leaders to defy dogmas in service of a greater good.

Why the Moral Courage Project now? According to Irshad Manji, "Our era promotes conformity on various fronts. Either you're liberal or you're conservative. Either you're a consumer or you're a loser. Either you swallow the orthodoxy of your ethnic, ideological and professional tribe or you're deemed a traitor. The pressure to identify with your 'own' reduces pluralism to groupthink. That's dishonest diversity."

Manji's message to students is: "When you exercise your unique voice, your community grows from talent that would otherwise be lost to self-censorship. Dare to develop individuality; it expands community."



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Why New York University as home to the Moral Courage Project? It's about more than Manhattan being a crossroads. There's also NYU's commitment to unbridled discourse. President John Sexton describes the university as a sanctuary of free thought. Supported by this institutional philosophy, the Moral Courage Project can provoke difficult conversations about culture, power, identity, responsibility, justice and other contentious issues that affect the next generation of change agents.

The Project's impact will be enhanced by where it's based: the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA). Housed at the Wagner School of Public Service, the RCLA serves as a hub for individuals from multiple disciplines. They come together not only to explore questions of leadership, but also to turn theories into useful practices.

What, then, are the concrete components of the Moral Courage Project?

Writing: Irshad Manji will produce her next book under the auspices of the Moral Courage Project.

Her thesis: Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is the realization that some things are more important than fear. As a professor of practice, Manji is perfectly poised to write an accessible, inspiring, yet serious leadership primer – one that shows all of us how we can transcend our fears of offending, of being ostracized, of shaming our families and even of being threatened with violence.

Teaching: As of September 2008, the Wagner School will offer “Public Leadership and Moral Courage,” a graduate course taught by Manji.

This course will differ from contemporary studies of ethics. It will resist relativism, the doctrine that tells us we can’t speak up about abuses of power if they take place under “other” belief systems. In an interdependent age, appreciating when to speak up and why is a crucial aspect of global public service. In addition, this course will pay attention to the personal development of students. The Moral Courage Project intends to produce leaders, not merely study them.

Public events: To ensure relevance beyond the campus, Irshad Manji will host “Conversations with Champions of Moral Courage.”

In the first such conversation, she engaged one of the Islamic world’s most maverick thinkers – a Sudanese scholar who argues that Muslims need secularism to be better Muslims. He chose this event as his official book launch. Audience members from throughout the city learned not only about a new perspective on Islam, but also about how to withstand backlash. Future conversations will feature Christians, Jews, African-Americans, Democrats, Republicans and others who speak truth to power in their communities.

New media: To guarantee a global impact, the Moral Courage Project will marry all of its activities to digital technology and distribute content in cutting-edge ways.

Can you imagine a student at NYU Abu Dhabi downloading a particularly compelling statement from Manji’s class or public events – and downloading it as a 30-second video on his cell phone? Now imagine that same student circulating the video to fellow students at NYU Tel Aviv, with a healthy debate flowering from a few text messages.

Welcome to only one example of how the Moral Courage Project intends to use its unorthodox content to generate an equally unusual amount of dialogue.

For more information about the Moral Courage Project: irshad.manji@nyu.edu



Photo by Tara Todras Whitehill