Our Common Values for a Strong and Unified Canada

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I immigrated to Canada in the early nineties, right after finishing my traditional training in Islamic studies in my country of birth, Egypt. Due to the differences that I perceived exited between my Islamic values and Canadian values, I was expecting a culture shock. I did indeed have one, but it was not because of how far Canadian society turned out to be from my Islamic values; but rather it was because of how close the values of Canadian society turned out to be to my Islamic values. Even more so than the society I had recently emigrated from!

This pleasant 'surprise' has challenged and shaped my thoughts and scholarship over the years. As a writer and academic I have had the opportunity to lecture and publish in dozens of countries around the world. My specialization in the higher objectives and values of the Islamic jurisprudence (Arabic: maqasid al-shariah), and especially their application to governance and legislation, has enabled me to reconcile what I had initially perceived as an anomaly. In fact, I now use many examples from the Canadian experience as examples for good practice in "Islamic governance", "Islamic family law" and "Islamic finance" – to the surprise of many.

The key idea is to understand what we mean by "Islamic" when we talk about government, law, policy, business or society. A government, law, policy, business or society is more "Islamic" when it conforms or respects the higher values and objectives of Islam, such as justice, equality, diversity, balance, rights, knowledge, security, dignity, freedom and peace. These values are not exclusive to any one community or nation. Indeed, Canadians and all humanity share them. Unfortunately, this logic does not appeal to some people as they try to distinguish themselves from others in ways that betray this fundamental and common humanity.

Recently, I had an argument with an English convert to Islam in London, England, during the Q and A session after a lecture I had given on Islamic ethics.
He asked: You mentioned that justice is a universal value?
I answered: Yes.
He said: But there is a difference between the Islamic justice and British justice.
I asked: Can you explain the difference?
He said: British legislators are not Muslim.
I asked: But are not the laws that criminalize murder, theft, monopoly, bribery, rape, domestic violence, and so on, 'Islamic laws'?
He said: No, because the non-Muslims who proposed them did not have the right [Islamic] 'intent' when they proposed them.
I asked: What do you think their intent was?
He said: Their intent was probably the establishment of justice.
I exclaimed: Isn't justice an "Islamic" intent too?
He replied: They applied justice for the sake of people's wellbeing, not for the sake of God.

I replied: But God does not need our justice. God's purpose is our wellbeing, isn't it?

Unfortunately, this young man could not see the point. He disagreed and accused me of "blurring the line between Islam and secularism"!

True Islamic values, other than a few rituals that are exclusively practiced by Muslims, are universal values and indeed Canadian values. Therefore, when Canadians, Muslims and non-Muslims, decide about voting in the upcoming elections, we should decide based on the values of our society and our future aspirations for it. We should not vote based on the issues that only concern a specific religious group or based on an identity politics that only serves to divide us. Religious values should unite Canadians, not divide them.

Prof. Jasser Auda is a Visiting Scholar at Carleton University's Centre for the Study of Islam. He will deliver the first of four public lectures on "Examining Shariah" on October 17 at 1 – 3 pm in 303 Paterson Hall.