



A Human Future

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AN E-QUARTERLY CONTRIBUTION TO THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION ABOUT VALUES AND THE COMMON GOOD. SUBSCRIBE



- Born in Burma and raised in Pakistan, Yahya Qureshi came to Canada in 1967. He taught for 36 years, in the public high school system, first in Toronto and later in Markham, Ontario. When he retired in 2003, he was recruited to be principal of the very well-regarded Islamic Foundation School of Toronto. He holds degrees from Peshawar University, the University of Toronto, and Niagara University. One of his children, Alia, had progressive multiple disabilities and lived out her later teen and adult life in L'Arche.

Canadian Muslims Looking to the Future: An Interview with Yahya Qureshi

Yahya Qureshi is a moderate Muslim, observant in his faith practices and a leader in his community. He is principal of a popular Muslim school that has received top ranking for its teaching of the Ontario curriculum. He describes his interest in politics and his hopes for the education of the next generation of young Canadian Muslims. The term “moderate” is variously defined and lived out by Muslims in Canada today, and a lively debate is gradually emerging in the Muslim community as to what is normative. This issue offers sidebar content and some links that give a glimpse into the diversity of thought among Muslims in Canada. *ed.*

Beth Porter: Is it important for Muslims to be involved politically in Canadian life?

Yahya Qureshi: It is important for all communities, but particularly for Muslims, because we have always taken a back seat. As a first generation, we were engaged in socio-economic and religious affairs—at the personal level, finding employment and fulfilling our religious duties, and at the community level, creating our institutions—mosques, community centers, cemeteries, funeral homes, and then schools to give our children a religious education. We left political representation to the people already established here. Now our youngsters are coming of age and a new generation is ready to participate in our democracy and in earning their own livelihood—these two come together. I believe it is an appropriate time for Muslims to get involved politically.

You ran as a candidate in the last municipal election in Markham. What prompted you to do so?

I have lived here for quite some time and know what the issues are, and as a teacher I am aware of the needs of the people in terms of education and the social environment. Also, I am quite well known, not just in the Muslim community but in all the other communities, because of being engaged in public education for many years. So I thought it would be good to represent and serve the people here.

Should faith play a role in Canadian political life?

Yes, because faith plays an important role in the lives of the people. We are a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. Parliament already shows a deep respect for the different religions that make up Canada. When Muslims celebrate Eid, it is like Christmas. It's a huge affair. It is good

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that such events are recognized by the government, by schools, and every segment of the society. Because a substantial number of people belong to this faith. There have been significant changes since Canadians became aware of these issues. Schools have a multi-faith calendar with religious days identified. These are not holidays as such, but accommodation is made to give staff and students the day off when they want it. Likewise, in government and industry. I think that's a fair accommodation. We no longer face situations where someone would say "no" to such a request.

I think Canada should strongly promote the religious aspect of society in general. Every religion teaches good stuff, and who doesn't want good stuff in their country? Religions bring decency, order, politeness, and civility, camaraderie and brotherhood—all these. Religious teaching makes for a cohesive, peaceful and organized society. The problem is when we don't focus on the positive aspects of religions, but on the negative, and when the media and people in pulpits nurture negativity. Then religion is not effective.

What are your hopes for the students who graduate from the Islamic Foundation school, and what are your thoughts on the public versus private religious school systems?

Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews all want religious education for their children. The public system is secular, but we do have some content in public high schools—for example, world religions is offered as an option. My thinking is that the public system could offer the option of a class in Islamic studies where there

were 20 or 25 students who want it, or a class for 25 Jewish children on the Jewish religion. As there is no public option, religious schools had to be established—because all these communities feel that basic religious education is important.

Parents want their children to learn their cultural and religious background and values—things sacred to the parents.

At the same time, the fact that the school I am running has been declared one of the top schools in Ontario is a sign of how seriously we are preparing our young people academically. Our intention is that they will not only be good Muslims but be part of mainstream society. All of our children are prepared to go to university and then finish their professional education and be competitive with the others in mainstream society for leadership roles, not just in Muslim society. It's a given, that you will be serving the Muslim community, but the larger goal is that you are a great Canadian citizen serving humanity in so many ways in Canadian society. Our school has become very popular and we have a large waiting list because everybody wants this kind of education for their children. Other countries, especially Middle Eastern countries, are looking at our model too, asking how to combine the government curriculum with the religious curriculum.

I have a dream that someday we will have here in

Every religion teaches good stuff, and who doesn't want good stuff in their country?

"The World We Seek" by His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan

"The world we seek is not a world where difference is erased, but where difference can be a powerful force for good, helping us to fashion a new sense of co-operation and coherence in our world, and to build together a better life for all."

The LaFontaine-Baldwin lecture of October 15, 2010. [Read more.](#)

- The Aga Khan is the religious leader of the worldwide community of Shia Ismaili Muslims. Newly elected Calgary mayor Naheed Nenshi is an Ismaili Muslim. [Official website of the Ismailis in Canada](#)



Canada an International Islamic University on par with top universities in the world, such as Harvard and Oxford, combined with Muslim scholarship from Jamai AlAzher (Cairo) or Medina University—a university that hires the best professors and offers opportunity to pursue the quest for knowledge in many fields, not just Islamic studies.

Does your school serve a particular group of Muslims?

Mainly, our students are Sunni but the school is open if someone wants to come from another Muslim background or a Christian, if they were willing to do the things that are required like wearing our uniform.

In our school we have Muslims from many parts of the world—from India, Pakistan, Sri Lankan, Bangladesh, that's one segment. Another is Middle Eastern and African. A third is West Indian. And a fourth is a mix of Europeans, Americans and

Canadians. It's really fun when we have our cultural days and ceremonies. The kids bring different foods, wear traditional clothes and speak different languages, and they display art and artifacts from their countries. And the parents meet people from other areas of the world. In Canada, you can see so much enjoyment in the sharing of cultural customs, cuisine, and traditions.

How did your students react to the fellow who wanted to burn the Qur'an?

The Qur'an is a good book, a brilliant book, and it is sacred for Muslims, so naturally they were upset. His plan to burn it was a sign of hatred and a very negative idea. In a way, it's the same kind of destructive negativity that was in the men who blew up the twin towers. Two wrongs don't make a right.

On the 9/11 anniversary a wonderful thing would be to ask ourselves, What are some things we can do in

Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, MD, MPH

As a believer with deep faith, as a Muslim, I fully believe that what I have lost, what was taken from me will never come back and that I need to go forward motivated by the spirit of those I lost, and to do them justice. I lost three precious daughters, but I am blessed with five other children and the future. We need to recognize and share our common humanity and realize that no one is immune from risks. Then there is the choice, the crossroads, the path of light or the path of darkness. I chose the first. The path of light in the long run is the most efficient and right choice, rather than to live with hatred or be consumed with revenge with all their medical consequences.... Also, I know that darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light and love can drive out darkness and hatred....

It's important to realize that any social change usually begins with a single person who is an obsessive individual, who sees a problem and envisions a new solution, who takes the initiative to act on that vision, who gathers resources and builds organizations to protect and market that vision, who provides energy and sustained focus to overcome the inevitable resistance, and who, decade after decade, keeps improving, strengthening, and broadening that vision until what was once a marginal idea has become a new norm.

From a lecture at Beth Tzedec Synagogue, Toronto



- Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, MD, MPH, is a Palestinian doctor who has long worked for peace, living in Gaza while treating Israeli and Palestinian patients in an Israeli hospital. Tragically, three of his daughters were killed by Israeli fire during the war in Gaza.

In memory of his daughters, he set up the "Daughters for Life" foundation to help provide health care and education to girls and women in the Middle East.

He is currently Associate Professor of Medicine at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto. He is author of the book, *I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey*.



the world to bring people together? To make people understand that negativity and destructiveness and warfare hurt innocent people? I think now we need fresh approaches to dealing with the crisis that Pakistan and the Muslim world is going through.

Can you comment on Pakistan today?

I was in Pakistan visiting family during the recent flood. The damage is enormous. Of course, the insurgency will take advantage of a situation like this. The international society is quite concerned and we are concerned about it. The insurgency has brought a lot of destruction to our country.

On a personal level, I was very sad to see the damage of the flood in my village. All the houses on Qureshi Street were severely damaged—about 200 homes. All the small animals are gone, and there will be no crops next year. But the people are resilient. The government is doing its best, and governments and people abroad have been donating large sums of money, and this is certainly appreciated. ■

Sites related to the Islamic Foundation School

- “Partnering in Muslim Education” — A project of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). In 2007–08, some OISE students approached Yahya Qureshi and other members of the Islamic Foundation School to help them learn about teachers’ perspectives on the education of Muslim students. The project looks at the needs and aspirations of Muslim students in public and private schools in Toronto. [Read more.](#)
- “The School has a Perfect 10” by Sara Green in the *Toronto Sun*, on the Islamic Foundation School. [Read more.](#)
- The Islamic Foundation School. [Read more.](#)
- Islamic Foundation of Toronto. [Read more.](#)
- Islamic schools exist in all major Canadian cities. Here is a site listing schools in British Columbia: [Click here.](#)

Raheel Raza



- At the liberal end of the Canadian Muslim spectrum, Raheel Raza is a well-educated and observant journalist and speaker and an outspoken advocate for human rights and gender equality. She is author of *Their Jihad... Not My Jihad* (Toronto: Basileia, 2005). She has worked with school boards to encourage a more inclusive curriculum and has long been committed to interfaith dialogue. Her [website](#) offers several articles. This one was written in 2009, after visiting her native Pakistan. [Read article.](#)

Further Reading: A Cross-section of Views

- Multiculturalism in Canada (a 2006 report). [Read more.](#)
- Canadian Islamic Congress. [Read more.](#)
- IQRA, an online Canadian magazine with a Muslim focus on current events and contemporary issues. It aims to attract ‘people who reflect.’ [Read more.](#)
- Muslim Canadian Congress. [Read more.](#)
- An American Muslim website that seeks to make a clear distinction between the theology and religion of Islam, and politics and terrorism involving Muslims. [Read more.](#)
- Gregory Baum: *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan: A Catholic Perspective* (Novalis, 2009). Recognizing the high unemployment and discrimination that Muslims in Montreal face, Fr. Baum connected with the group Presence Muselman (Muslim Presence), a group inspired by the ideas of the Muslim theologian Tariq Ramadan. [Read review](#) in the Literary Review of Canada.
- Tarek Fatah, founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress, addresses societal issues in the interpretation of Islam and is sometimes criticized in the Muslim community as too outspoken. He is the author of two books: *Chasing a Mirage: The Tragic Illusion of an Islamic State*, (John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2008) and *The Jew is Not My Enemy: Unveiling the Myths that Fuel Muslim Anti-Semitism*, (McClelland & Stewart, October 2010). [Read a review of Chasing a Mirage.](#)

“Why Canadian Muslims are Different” by Stephen Schwartz



In one immediately relevant way, Canada is different from the U.S. today: in its Islamic communities. Canadian Islam is more moderate, more diverse and more open to debate than American or even British Islam.

American Sunni Islam functions under the domination of a “Wahhabi lobby” of organizations financed by radicals in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, while American Shias cleave to the line set out by the Iranian clerical regime. British Islam, as I have learned by direct observation, is deeply divided between radicals, who account for about 30% of the Muslims attending mosques in the U.K., and a large moderate majority.” [Read full article.](#)

- Stephen Suleyman Schwartz, an American journalist and convert to Islam, is Executive Director of the [Centre for Islamic Pluralism](#), a Washington DC think tank that challenges the dominance of American Muslim life by militant Islamist groups.

Muslim Political Participation in Canada: from marginalization to empowerment?

“The bulk of Muslims are fairly recent immigrants, still with roots in their countries of decent. The majority seemed to take more interest in the affairs of those ‘home countries’ than in Canada. As a result of these and many other complex factors, the Muslim community was significantly outside the margins on many indices, including political and social participation.... It tended to be restricted to agitation for specific national or regional causes (Kashmir, Palestine, etc.). Political involvement took place within the general context of racial and ethnic polarization, and did not define the participants as specifically Muslim....

Recently, a number of seminal events catapulted Muslims to the centre of the political stage. The tragic events on September 11th and the 2004 invasion of Iraq brought Muslims to the forefront of national and international concern. Muslims found themselves, intentionally or not, at the very centre of Canadian politics... The media microscope resulted in a growing political activism and evolving sense of identity-formation.” [Read more.](#)

An excerpt from “Muslim Political Participation in Canada: from marginalization to empowerment?” by Hussein A. Hamdani, Kamran Bhatti, Nabila F. Munawar.

www.larche.ca/en/inspiration

The L’Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 137 communities of L’Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L’Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.