

Values in Public Life: an interview with Qasim Rashid

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The Center for Arab and Islamic Studies hosts the “Values in Public Life” series exploring the views and experiences of people from a wide variety of backgrounds and careers whose public lives exemplify their values. Here, **Qasim Rashid**, an author, attorney, and former candidate for Congress, talks about service to humanity as a necessary part of a relationship with God.

The term “values” is used a lot in American public life. It often refers to religiously-informed moral judgement, but of course not all values are religiously derived, and even devout people sometimes disagree about important values or how to express them. What would you say have been the most important sources of your values and beliefs about how we should live together in society?

The Qur’an defines the three levels of good as justice, kindness, and kinship. It defines a person’s values by their actions, not their words. Moral values are moral when they ensure that absolute justice is the minimum standard by which we serve humanity. Indeed, absolute justice has to be the ground floor upon which we build society. Beyond that, kindness and kinship serve as the pillars upon which to elevate others, mitigate suffering, and truly be our brother’s keeper. A person’s personal relationship with God is just that—personal. No government or other person has the right to intervene in that relationship. Likewise, no person has the right to impose their personal relationship with God on others. Likewise, each person’s obligation to serve humanity is necessarily a public obligation. And of the two, i.e. relationship with God and relationship with humanity, the latter is more important. A person who neglects their relationship to serve humanity is inevitably neglecting their relationship with God. Such a relationship then becomes worthless. If you want to talk to me about your values, show me your actions in service to humanity and you won’t need to say a word beyond that.

Has your thinking about the place of values in public life – in your own or in society generally – changed over the course of your life?

The value of service to humanity is a value my parents infused in me at a young age. What’s changed is how I’ve come to apply that value as I’ve completed my education and built my career. As a student that value was manifested in service through adopt a highway clean ups, food drives, blood drives, and things of that nature. As a lawyer that value of service advanced to advocacy for marginalized communities, demanding legal remedy, or protecting someone’s basic human rights through the legal system. Now, as I’ve sought public office, that value manifests through meaningful policy change to prevent harm against marginalized communities. The same core value of service continues to drive my focus to expand my efforts.

Can you tell us about a time the issue of “values and public life” presented a difficulty? Or conversely a time when it presented an opportunity or a source of satisfaction?

During a previous campaign I received repeated Islamophobic comments and threats from who I initially assumed was an anonymous troll. Upon a chance inquiry I realized the person had a GoFundMe for massive medical debt. I believe healthcare is a human right and accordingly, contributed to his campaign and leveraged my network to fundraise over \$20,000 to pay off his debt. It turned out the person was also a constituent. In the end, he continued his anti-Muslim bigotry and dehumanization. That's his choice, of course. I take satisfaction in demonstrating that service to humanity isn't dependent on reciprocity, but on ensuring we uphold justice, kindness, and kinship.

You've campaigned for public office in Virginia, and in those campaigns you've spoken very directly about how your values relate to questions about rights, justice, and public policy. But from some quarters, you received extensive criticism from people who seemed to think that as a Muslim and an immigrant, both the source and presumed content of your beliefs were unacceptable. And yet your online presence remained kind and engaging (with occasional spice and some dad jokes!) – could you give us some insight into how you navigate that? In particular, you seemed to make a choice not to decontextualize your policy ideas – that is, you often explicitly connected them to your religious beliefs, in an area where most voters don't share your religion and you were often attacked for it.

The Islam that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) established is a religion primarily focused with the alleviation of suffering by ensuring every person serves all humanity to the best of their ability. Likewise, it is a faith dedicated to connecting humanity with its Creator. Of these two primary obligations, service to humanity and service to God, the more important obligation is service to humanity. In this context, my focus remains to uphold justice to ensure I fulfill my obligation of service to humanity. That doesn't mean the Islamophobic comments, dehumanization, and even death threats don't take their toll. Of course they do. But my focus on service to humanity helps me keep things in context and calibrate my efforts to align with resolving the major issues humanity faces—poverty, hunger, abuse of marginalized communities, education access, genocide, and more. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also famously taught, "A smile is charity." So if my dad jokes bring a smile to people's faces, even in the shape of a groan, I'll take that as a win. At the end of the day, we all only have a few days on this Earth. I don't believe they should be spent in fear of one another or hatred for one another—but rather on lifting each other up so all of our children tomorrow have a better life than we had yesterday and today.