



L'Arche Canada

L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.

# A Human Future

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## *The Interfaith Imperative: A Canadian Muslim Woman's View* An interview with Raheel Raza



Raheel Raza is a free-lance writer and a public speaker. Besides her work for the Ontario Public Service, she has spoken to dozens of church and civic groups since 9/11 and been interviewed by the media frequently. A passionate advocate for human rights and a leader among Muslim women, Raheel promotes interfaith relations. On International Women's Day 2002 she received the Women's Intercultural Network award for "Making a Difference". She lives in Toronto with her husband and two sons, ages 18 and 20.

*This issue of A Human Future is an invitation to readers to respond to the Canadian interfaith imperative, and as Jean Vanier urges, to come to know and value one another. Raheel Raza and I met in a women's interfaith group. I am struck by Raheel's commitment to dialogue, to her own Muslim faith, and to matters of justice in Islam.* Beth Porter, ed.

A Human Future is a free e-quarterly. We invite you to read back issues and to subscribe at: [www.larchecanfoundation.org](http://www.larchecanfoundation.org).

**Beth Porter: Please tell me about your background.**

Raheel Raza: I grew up in Pakistan. At a young age I rebelled against cultural norms that said women should be "seen and not heard." My parents were educated, liberated Muslims who encouraged me to pursue an education and to follow whatever direction I wished. I did not have an arranged marriage. I am from the Sunni tradition and my husband from the Shia, but when people are educated and develop a broad outlook, differences tend to fall away or one finds they don't

have to be a source of contention. My husband and I believe deeply in pluralism, which I see as the essence of life in Canada. We

came to Canada with our two young sons 14 years ago, looking for better opportunities and new horizons.

**"We must take back the mosques to ensure that the voices of reasonable Muslim men and women are heard."**



# دیوان حافظ سیرازی

*It used to be  
That when I would wake in the morning  
I could with confidence say,  
“What am ‘I’ going to  
Do?”*

*That was before the seed  
Cracked open.*

*Now Hafiz is certain:*

*There are two of us housed  
In this body,*

*Doing the shopping together in the  
market and*

*Tickling each other*

*While fixing the evening’s food.*

*Now when I awake*

*All the internal instruments play the  
same music:*

*“God, what love-mischief can ‘We’ do  
For the world  
Today?”*

From *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, The Great Sufi Master*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky (Penguin Compass, 1999).

Sufism is a mystical branch of Islam.

Hafiz was a fourteenth century Persian poet.

<http://www.hafizonlove.com/>

**BP: What drew you into interfaith relations?**

RR: I was amazed at the lack of information in the Canadian mainstream about Islam, which is commonly seen in terms of oil, turmoil, fundamentalism, and terrorism. Few people know, for instance, that Muslims place a high value on justice and compassion, and believe God will hold them to account for their behaviour. Also, in Canada we were interacting for the first time with people of other faiths, and my children began asking questions for which I had no answers.

At our interfaith women’s group, I met Jewish and Christian women keen like myself to learn about ‘the other’. I became friends with Karen, who is Jewish. We have worked together on issues of discrimination. My Christian friend and mentor is a United Church minister also named Karen. Through her, I spoke at a church for the first time, on September 16, 2001.

**BP: Has 9/11 had much impact on you and your family?**

RR: I feel a vulnerability when I travel to Pakistan, and we have asked our sons not to cross the U.S. border. They are civic-minded young Canadians, like many Muslims here. If they were stopped and questioned I fear they would be shattered. As you know there are new issues of rights and freedoms for Muslims since 2001.

**BP: In a *Toronto Star* article last year you criticized the custom of Muslim men refusing to shake hands with women. What has brought you to this place of publicly challenging Islamic customs?**

RR: As a Muslim feminist and activist, some of these things make me very angry because they are not rooted in Islam but are cultural norms being flouted as faith. The fact that my husband and I needed to learn to relate to each other’s traditions has helped us think outside the box. Once one can do this, all sorts of questions arise. And I have always believed that God created men and women equal and that the Qur’an is about justice.

Several years ago Vision T.V. aired a documentary on ‘honour killings’ in some Muslim countries. It told of families killing their own daughters because they believed the young

## Jean Vanier



*Peace can only come, says Vanier, founder of L'Arche, when weaker members of society are fully welcomed. Vanier believes too much interreligious dialogue begins with theology and spirituality – in a comparison of belief systems – and so gets nowhere. “You get to a point where you ask, are Jesus and Muhammed the same?... Either you say ‘Yes’ or you say ‘No’. Better to ask together, What does it mean to be a human being and how do human beings grow?” Beliefs can be tackled later, says Vanier, after the discovery of a shared humanity and the mutual acceptance of the other.*

From: “Ending a chain of Violence: *The Tablet* Interview of Jean Vanier” by Austen Ivereigh, March 20, 2004.



*L'Arche member Alia Qureshi, family and friends at a L'Arche interfaith event. A person with a developmental disability can provide the context to meet around common human issues.*



women had been in a compromising situation – perhaps alone with a man for a few minutes – and thereby had dishonoured their family. I was shocked. I was also concerned that non-Muslims would misconstrue honour killings to be approved Islamic practice. I passionately wanted to tell them about the goodness of Islam and that these killings were an outrageous aberration, but I realized I could only speak with conviction if I knew the Islamic teachings about women.

I undertook a concerted study of my faith. Sure enough, I learned that Islamic injunctions give women freedom and equality: the right to vote, own property, do business and not be obligated to hand over their earnings, and choice in marriage and divorce. Unfortunately a huge gap exists in the preaching and practice of Islam. Behind the oppression of women in Muslim societies are uneducated or opportunistic male leaders and entrenched cultural traditions kept in place by political and socio-economic factors and ignorance. (Over 800 million of the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world are absolutely illiterate.) Today, oppression of women and the hatred of “the other” is promoted by Wahhabism, [a Saudi sect] which has come to dominate and teaches an extremist ideology.

**BP: A recent article suggested moderate Muslims like you and your husband need to organize to resist the appropriating of Islam by extremists. What are your thoughts on this?**

RR: It's very important for progressive Muslims to unite across the world. I wrote about this myself in the *Toronto Star* recently: “In Canada, we must take back the mosques to ensure that the voices of reasonable Muslim men and women are heard over the stringent calls for a physical *jihad*. Our *jihad* is to ensure that Canada remains a safe and peaceful environment for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.” Progressive Christians and Jews will join with Muslims to fight against racism, extremism, and hate crimes.

**BP: What is your hope for young Muslim women?**

RR: Women are the key to the future of Islam. I'm heart-

ened by the work Muslim women are doing in interpreting the scripture for themselves. Despite numerous obstacles, Muslim women are active, assertive and engaged. This year, Shirin Ebadi became the first Muslim woman to win a Nobel Peace prize. Educated Iranian women are spearheading a debate to change laws that treat women as unequal citizens. In Morocco this year women successfully pressed for similar changes.

In Canada, I believe that Muslim women will continue to re-claim the faith that gives us amazing rights and to make the needed changes. We face constant challenges: media propaganda, and traditional and conservative elements in Islamic society, including Muslim women who are not ready for change. But we have brilliant North American female scholars like Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan and Asma Barlas. I hope that Muslim women will continue reconciliation efforts within Islam and in interfaith relations. One result of the terrorist attacks is that Canadian Muslims are taking a new interest in interfaith relations. Those of us who have strong bonds with our sisters in other faiths realize that what we have in common is greater than our differences. *A Human Future* is edited by Beth Porter.



*The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 121 communities of L'Arche on five continents, 26 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.*

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## ON LANGUAGE AFTER 9/11

The use of [apocalyptic] language and ideas to explain both attack and response finds many an echo in western Christian history – and also, coincidentally, in Islamic history.... The language implies that we are in the throes of a cosmic showdown between good and evil, and that God has fingered the one person or group who can deal with this situation as God's chosen instrument of revenge.... Almost all major religious traditions have developed fundamentalist groupings whose language is usually much less nuanced, and much more attracted to the apocalyptic and violent strains of their respective faiths, than is the [faith's] mainstream."

From "Cosmic Showdown: The road to violence in the Christian tradition" by Mary Malone, in *Voices Across Boundaries*, Summer 2003.

## SUGGESTIONS

Speak with a person of a different faith when you next have opportunity. Arrange to visit a mosque, synagogue or temple of a different faith tradition.

## FOR YOUR INTEREST

- Raheel's site: [www.raheelraza.com](http://www.raheelraza.com). Recent *Toronto Star* article: [www.thestar.com](http://www.thestar.com)
- Asma Barlas: "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an
- Amina Wadud: *Qur'an and Woman: Re-Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, Oxford, 1999.
- Riffat Hassan's website: [www.webb-international.org](http://www.webb-international.org)
- Salima Bhimani: *Majalis al-ilm: Sessions of Knowledge (Reclaiming and Representing the Lives of Muslim Women)*, Toronto: TSAR Publications, 2003.
- Introduction to Islam: [www.Islamicherald.com](http://www.Islamicherald.com)
- On Wahhabism: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahhabism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahhabism)
- *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It*, by Phyllis Chesler. 2003, Jossey-Bass
- Muslims against terrorism: [www.m-a-t.org](http://www.m-a-t.org)
- Canadian Islamic Congress: [www.canadianislamiccongress.com/](http://www.canadianislamiccongress.com/)
- On the historical relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam: [www.quran.ca](http://www.quran.ca)
- *The Ties that Bind*, an NFB Project: [www.nfb.ca/tiesthatbind/](http://www.nfb.ca/tiesthatbind/)