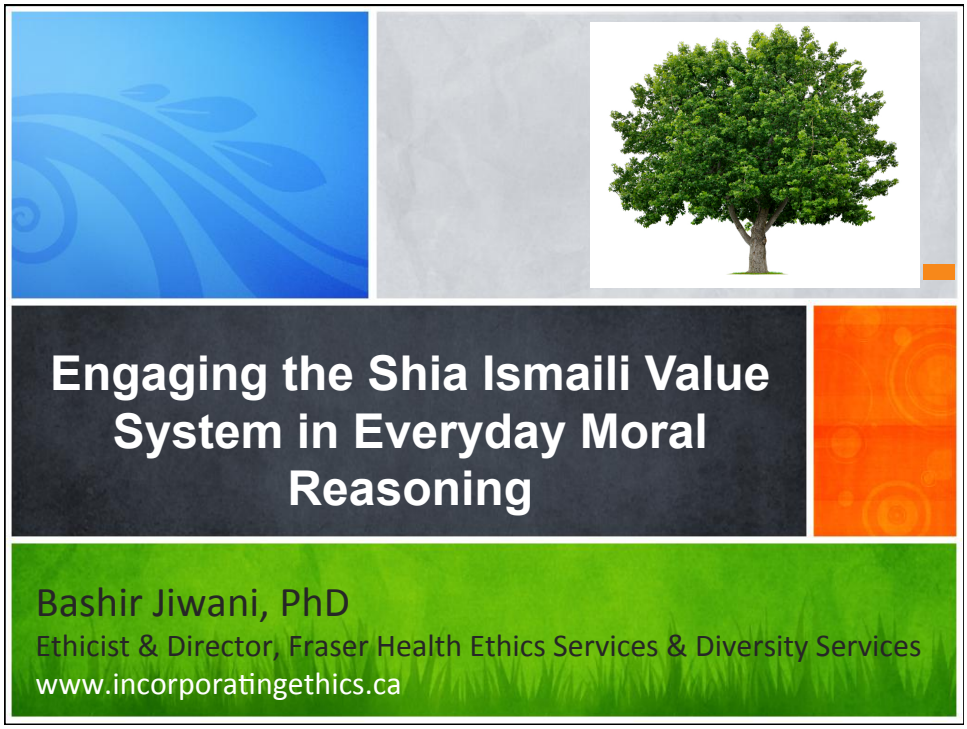
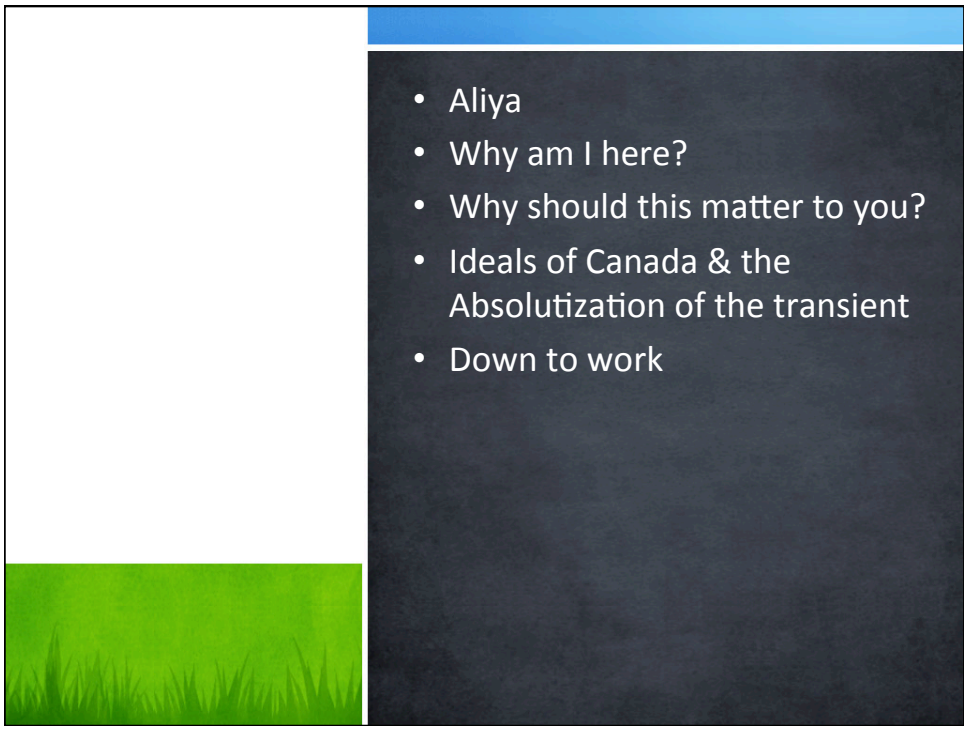
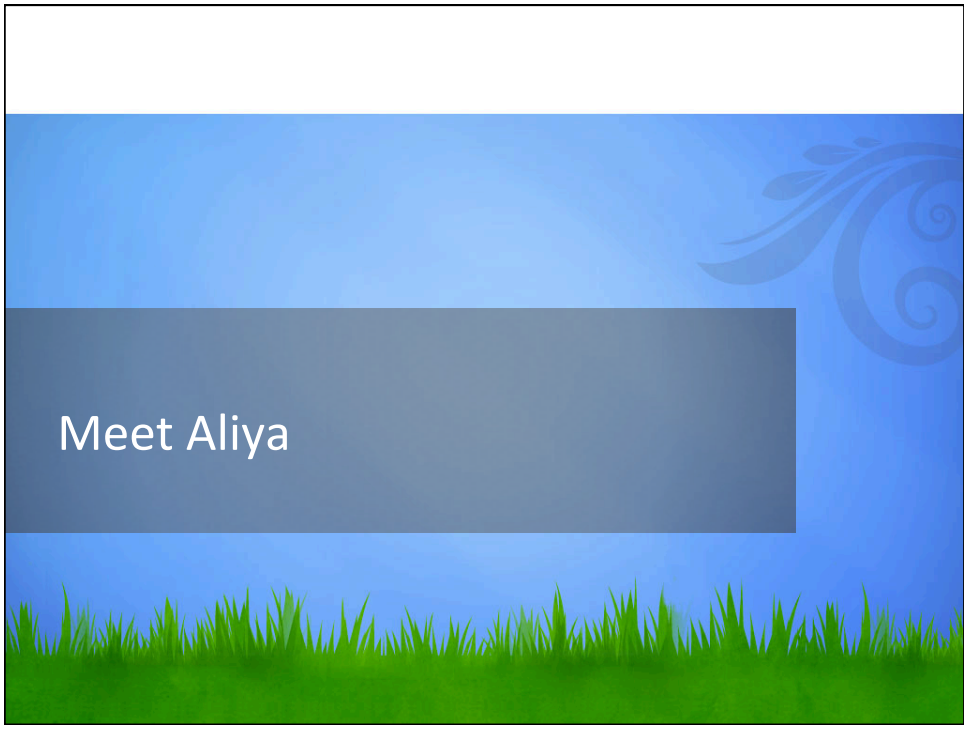

Engaging the Shia Ismaili Value System in Everyday Moral Reasoning
Bashir Jiwani, PhD
Ethicist & Director, Fraser Health Ethics Services & Diversity Services
www.incorporatingethics.ca


Aliya
Why am I here?
Why should this matter to you?
Ideals of Canada & the Absolutization of the transient
Down to work



Aliya

- Aliya is 38 years old.
- She was born in Toronto to a well-off family
- Her parents were from East Africa, and her great grandparents (whom she had never met) were from India
- She is the mother of two beautiful young girls: Sasha who is ten and Jenna who is eight.
- Aliya has a degree in finance from Ryerson University.

4

Aliya

- She is currently a Vice-President at a major Canadian Bank, whose office is in Vancouver
- The family of three live in a gorgeous house and enjoy a very comfortable lifestyle
- Both girls attend private school and participate in multiple extra-curricular activities
- Aliya is very careful to give them the same discipline and work ethic she was taught so they too can grow up to be successful like all the other members of her family

5

Aliya

- Aliya is divorced.
- Aliya first began to suspect she was gay in university, but denied this to herself.
- She got married and had kids because it was important to her to play the role she believed her parents expected of her
- But after 10 years with her husband, she realized that she could not keep living a lie

6

Aliya

- Aliya told her husband the truth, hoping he would understand. But he was deeply hurt and became very angry
- At first he threatened Aliya with harm. But he did not want the girls to find out and so he did not say anything to anyone
- He simply left Aliya and the children and moved to Toronto to be with his family
- The girls see their father in the summer, and speak to him by phone and on facetime once a week.

7

Aliya

- Aliya has not told anyone about her sexual orientation – not her parents, her two older brothers, or her children
- For the last year and a half, Aliya has been discreetly seeing someone – Katherine.
- Katherine also works for the bank and the two met on a work trip they had to take together with two other colleagues.
- The girls know Katherine as their mother's best friend. They like her very much and the four of them spend a lot of time together.
- Katherine is becoming a bit impatient with Aliya, as she wants the world to know about their relationship so she can play the proper role in the girls' lives and the family can live the life a family should live.
- Katherine's family knows she is gay and that she is seeing Aliya. They know Katherine is serious about this relationship and understand that it is important to Aliya that the relationship remain secret for now.

8

Aliya

- Though she doesn't attend Jamatkhana regularly, Aliya feels a strong connection to being Ismaili.
- Her main contact comes from attending morning Jamatkhana which she does once a month.
- Aliya's aunt takes the kids to Jamatkhana on Fridays and weekends once in awhile and the girls attend BUI when they don't have soccer or ballet
- Aliya's family has never been particularly religious and Aliya doesn't feel confident in speaking about her faith.
- Recently Aliya was approached to help the Economic Planning Board provide financial planning assistance to newly arrived members of the Jamat
- This is well within her skill set, but Aliya feels she just doesn't have time for it. She has a demanding job and enough challenges in her life at present. But her cousin on the EPB has been persistent in trying to get her involved.

9

Aliya

- Katherine's family is Catholic and of Scottish origin, though she herself does not follow any religion.
- She doesn't really understand what it means to be Ismaili.
- She knows of the Aga Khan and has a favourable impression of his good works.
- But she has an overall negative impression of Islam, and while Aliya is different and Ismailis seem to be different, she retains her suspicions.
- Aliya's fear of telling people she is gay suggests to Katherine that the faith is as intolerant as it is portrayed.
- Katherine also knows that Aliya's cousin has been trying to get her to help out on some committee. She knows Aliya's cousin is well-meaning, but is skeptical of this do-good worldview and just wishes everyone could leave Aliya alone

10

Aliya

- Aliya's parents still live in Toronto.
- Her brothers and their families all live in Los Angeles where they moved to run a successful business with one of her eldest brother's friends.
- When Aliya decided to move to Vancouver two years ago to pursue a promotion (and to get some space), her parents were proud and also sad. They would miss their little monkeys.
- With flexible work schedules and financial means, at first they were able to come visit Aliya and the kids every month.

11

Aliya

- But four months ago, her mom told Aliya that her father had been diagnosed with prostate cancer.
- While not immediately life threatening, it was serious enough to require surgery, followed by chemotherapy.
- Aliya and her brothers all went back to Toronto for the surgery, but then had to return to work and for the kids' school.
- Aliya knows her mother is having a very hard time looking after her father and her father misses her very much.
- But Aliya does not want to leave her job, the kids and Katherine.
- Aliya also feels stifled in Toronto. She knows she will fight with her parents if she goes back, and feel very unhappy being there. And she will have to deal with her ex-husband.

12

Aliya

- Today is Katherine's birthday.
- Aliya has planned a surprise birthday party for Katherine at Aliya's house. She has catered the party with Katherine's favorite foods and wines.
- A number of their closest friends and Katherine's family are there, along with the girls.
- Dinner has been served and the cake has been cut.
- Aliya is tired and sits with her glass in a corner.
- She watches in the distance as Jenna asks one of their friends for a sip.

13

Aliya

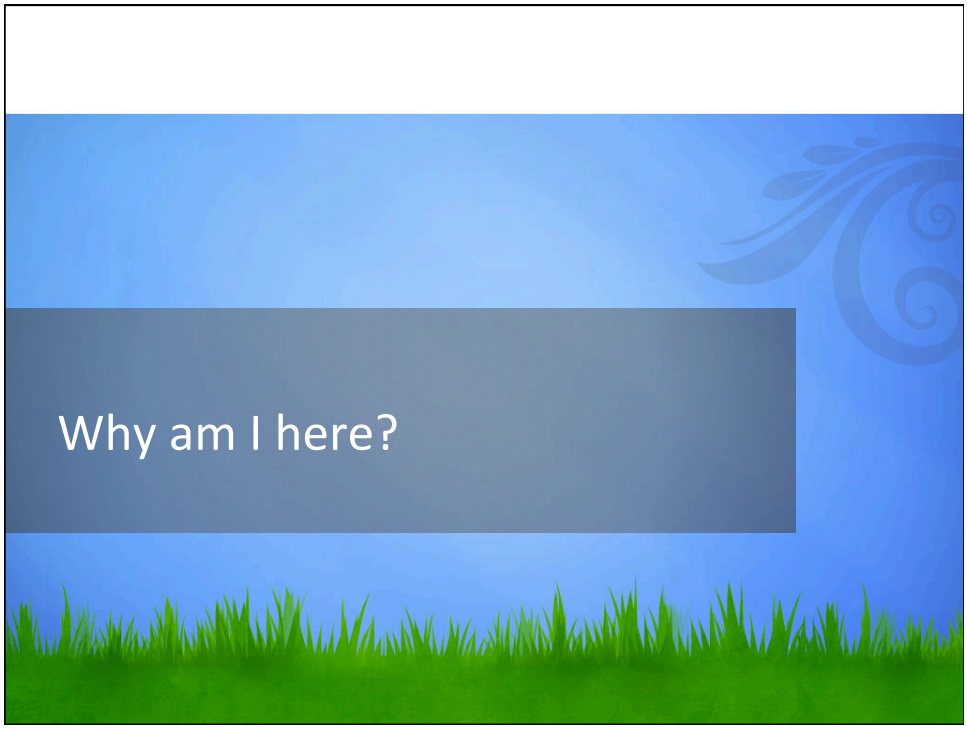
- Suddenly, Aliya is overcome with fear. Jenna looks so innocent and vulnerable.
- Should Aliya be allowing alcohol in the home like this? They had always had a bar in the house when she was growing up in Toronto. And even her pious aunts and uncles would drink when they came over.
- But sitting there, looking at her baby, Aliya wondered… She wondered about so many things.
- Just then Katherine came over and, with a tender smile said, "penny for your thoughts"
- Aliya didn't know where to begin. A tear formed in the corner of her eye.

14

What are the questions that Aliya needs to work through?

Important life questions Aliya is facing

- What should Aliya's strategy be for telling people about her relationship with Katherine?
- What should Aliya's approach be to supporting her parents while her father is critically ill?
- What should Aliya teach the girls about what it means to have a successful life?
- What should Aliya's approach be to having alcohol in the house?
- What should Aliya's approach be to voluntary service?
- How should Aliya approach the girls' religious education?



Bashir

- Training
  - Ethicist and Director of Ethics Services and Diversity Services
  - Not trained in religious or Islamic studies
  - Work involves helping people make hard choices
- Institutional work
  - Mawlana Hazar Imam has emphasized ethics
  - Institutions are working to support the Jamat with this
    - A word about the handout

Respect

- Kindly gently well
- Listening to understand
- Engaging with a view to collaboration

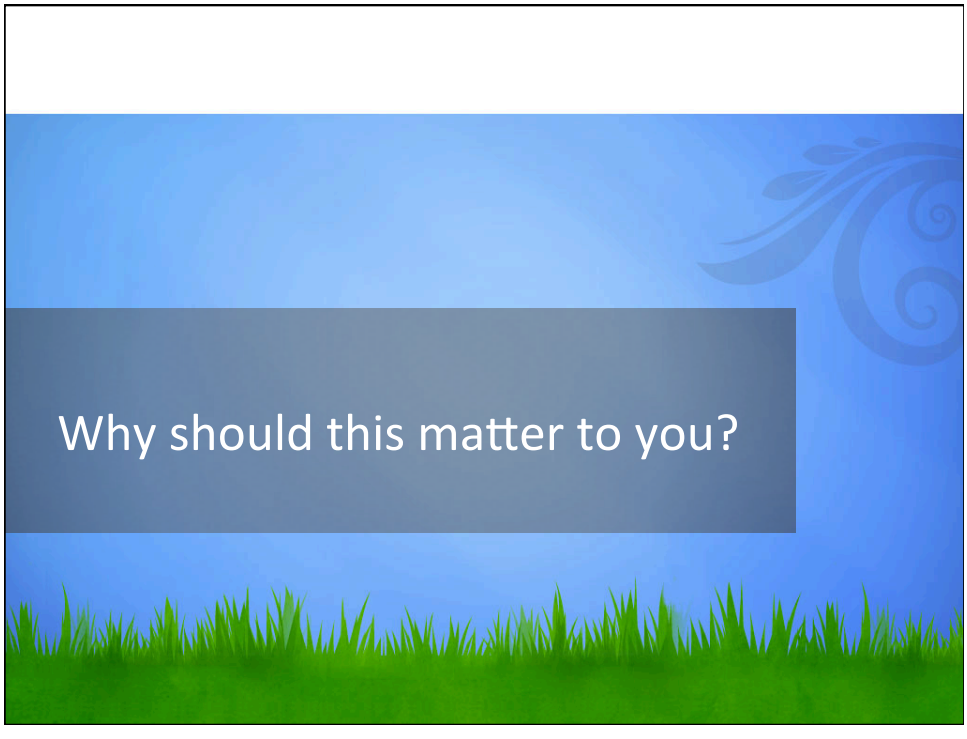
Ethically literate people

who can…

- **reason morally** whenever they analyse and resolve problems,
- Who can see the world through the **lens of ethics**,
- who can **articulate their moral reasoning** clearly - even in a world of cultural and religious diversity –
- and have the **courage** to make tough choices.

My goal today

- To provide practical help with what it means to live as ethically literate Shia Ismaili Muslim in today's world
- To understand these skills
- To practice these skills
- To create a framework that can be followed independently



- Integrity
- Personal peace of mind/happiness
- Peace in society
- Peace in the Jamat
- Social progress

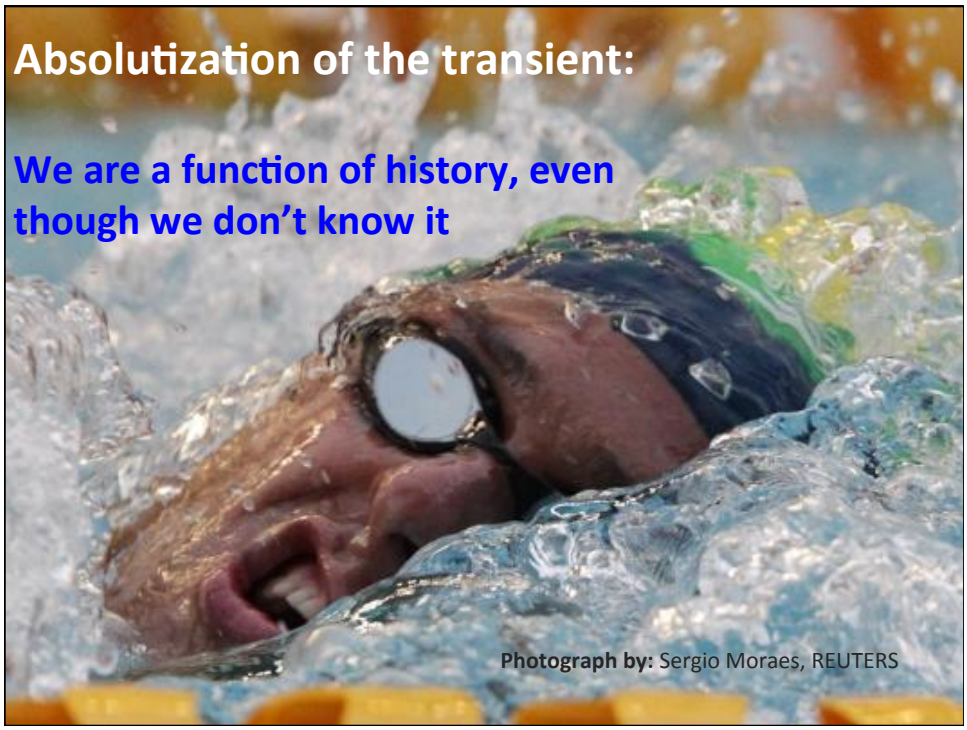
Phases of life

Age	Yrs	Life Stage	Focus	Wisdom/ Experience	Significance of choices	Years of Impact
1-5	5	baby/ Toddler	Growing/playing	None	low	0
6-13	5	child	Growing/playing/ learning	None	low	2
14-26	12	young adult	Studying/ Making life choices: • What will I Study? • Where will I live? • Who will I marry • How many kids?	Little	massive	40-60
27-67	40	adult	Working/ parenting/ supporting parents	More	high	20
68-88	20	senior	Family/personal wellbeing	Lots	medium	10-20

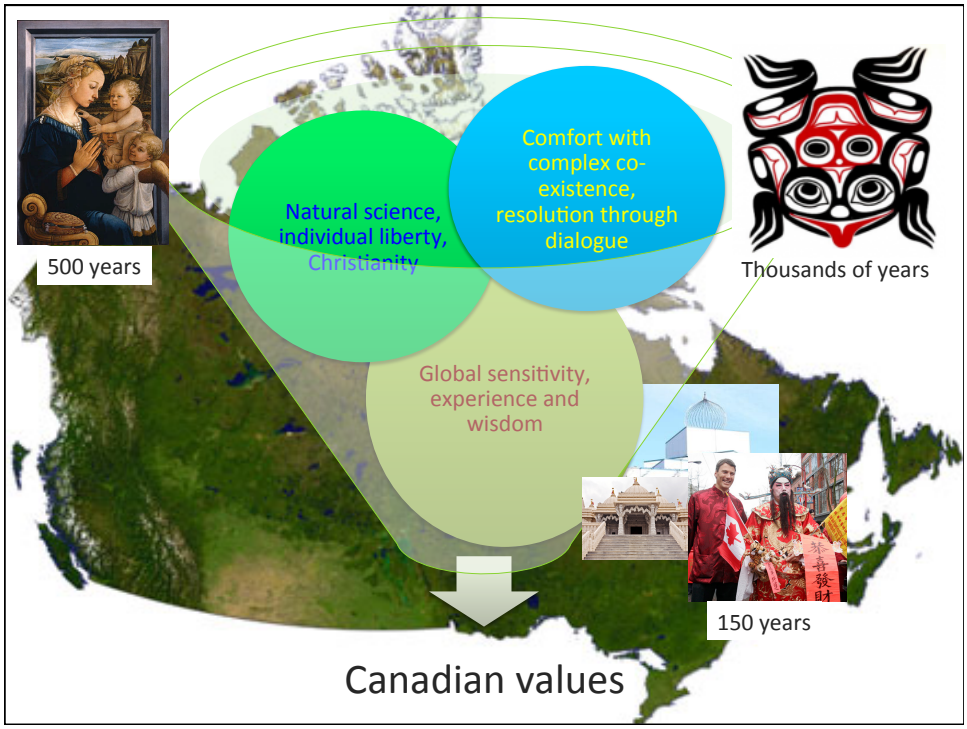
Canadian ideals and the absolutization of the transient

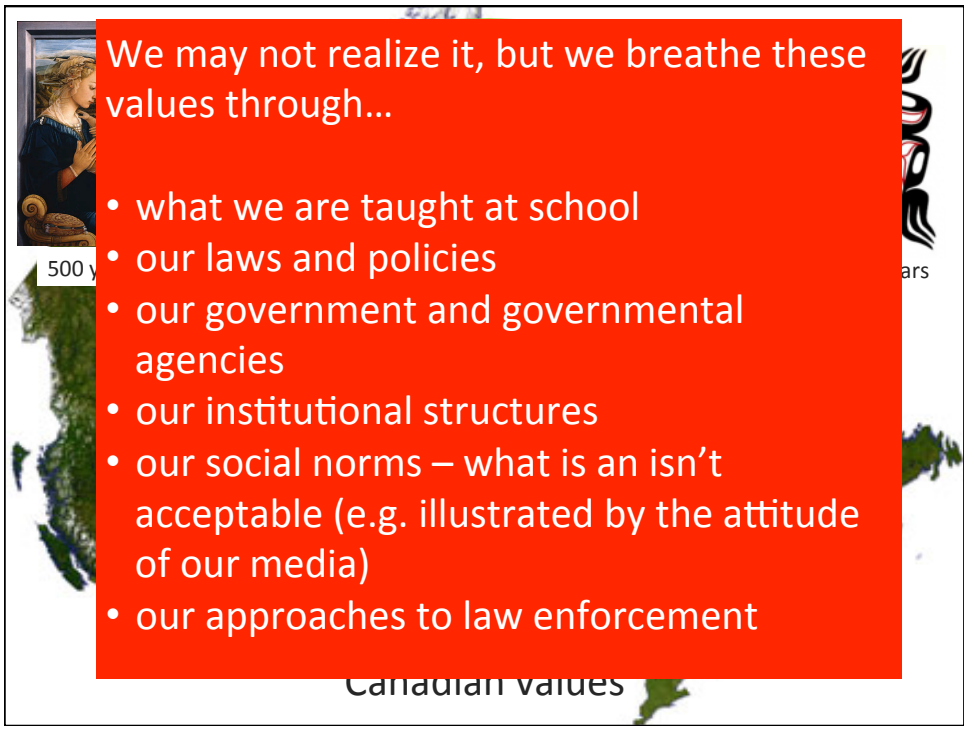
Absolutization of the transient:

We are a function of history, even though we don't know it



Photograph by: Sergio Moraes, REUTERS


500 years
Natural science, individual liberty, Christianity
Comfort with complex co-existence, resolution through dialogue
Thousands of years
Global sensitivity, experience and wisdom
150 years
Canadian values


We may not realize it, but we breathe these values through…
• what we are taught at school
• our laws and policies
• our government and governmental agencies
• our institutional structures
• our social norms – what is an isn't acceptable (e.g. illustrated by the attitude of our media)
• our approaches to law enforcement

What I see Mawlana Hazar Imam is helping us to do

Let's get to work

Important life questions Aliya is facing

- What should Aliya's strategy be for telling people about her relationship with Katherine?
- What should Aliya's approach be to supporting her parents while her father is critically ill?
- What should Aliya teach the girls about what it means to have a successful life?
- What should Aliya's approach be to having alcohol in the house?
- What should Aliya's approach be to voluntary service?
- How should Aliya approach the girls' religious education?

Articulation Template

For the question…

We think Aliya should…

This lives up to the values of…

These values are most important because…

The Process

1. Choose a question
2. Discussing the facts
   - What do we know (based on what evidence)?
   - What information is missing ?
   - How can we maximize the quality of information we are working with?
3. Look at the various values articulated and identify ones that look most relevant
4. Read the value theme and discuss what this element means
5. Explore what it would look to guide Aliya's decision and behaviour by this element
6. Explore what else is important - based on other considerations
7. Discuss the priority of the values that should inform the decision
8. Build a solution that allows us to live up to these values
9. Articulate it

Thank you! www.incorporatingethics.ca