

DEFINING VALUES: WHO DEFINES OUR CODE OF CONDUCT?

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Description: A look at the meaning of values and the influence they have on our behavior. Who decides what is right and what is wrong?

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Values can be defined as one's  principles, or standards of behaviour. They are often called morals or ethics and are sometimes enshrined in codes of conduct or rules of behaviour. Values are important and long lasting beliefs shared by the members of a culture or community. They define what is good or bad and what is desirable or undesirable. Values have an immense influence on a person's behaviour and serve as broad guidelines in all situations.

Some would argue that we all have an innate sense of morality. They say that no matter our religion, colour or race, there are certain qualities that serve as the moral standard. For instance we could all agree that child molestation is an abhorrent act. In a 2011 study conducted by Jesse Prinz, a distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the City University of New York, 100% of the participants agreed that it was. Regardless of tradition or culture, we all desire to live in a world where the values of kindness, generosity and honesty are the norm. Nobody wants to live in a world where cruelty is acceptable or where murder is a part of daily life. Now consider the taking of life that took place in Roman amphitheatres and the public torture and execution spectacles of medieval Europe.

There are also some philosophers, psychologists, social anthropologists and others who study societies, who believe that moral standards are a social and cultural constructs. Each community, across time and place, they say, faces unique challenges and their moral standards are defined by their needs. One culture's good can very easily be another culture's evil. Nevertheless murder is abhorrent, we can all agree to that. But what if it suits the needs of the society? Take cannibalism for instance. This is a practice found at one time or another across the globe. In one cross-historical sample anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday found evidence for cannibalism in 34% of cultures.^[1]

Now where does this leave us? We all desire to live peacefully. Can we take that as a given? Is it a desire for peace that causes cross border wars, or is it a desire for land or oil or whatever that particular society regards as a commodity of value? We all desire kindness, don't we? We all want to be treated with compassion, and tenderness. Is that why we detain and lock up asylum seekers? Is that why there are stateless people,

homeless people, and caste systems? Are even the universal values, the ones that we all desire different for different people? And not only that, are our working definitions of what these values mean different? If that is the case who decides what the ultimate values are? Who decides what values really do transcend time and place? Who decides what is really good and what is really bad? If we don't all agree on what values are universal, then what about those that are of a lesser degree? It seems that each person's values are different and because values are so ingrained, we are not always aware that our responses in life are due to the values we hold. Sometimes they are unique to our own culture and perspective.

Muslims believe that God, the creator and sustainer of the world and all that exists, the One who created us, has set the standards. He unambiguously defined our values. God did not create mankind and abandon him to the wiles and vagaries of his own nature. He did not leave us guessing what is right and what is wrong, and what is the best action to take in a given situation. He created us and knows us better than we know ourselves. He clearly defined what are good values and gave us all the guidance we need. Much like a new car or a new computer He provided us with a manual or guidebook. God sent prophets to guide mankind right from Prophet Adam all the way down to the last Prophet of God, Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. Islam has detailed our rules of behaviour and code of conduct clearly in the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad.

Besides that, Islam asserts that humankind is naturally inclined to good and that the good values include righteousness and piety. In Islam righteousness means that we should be sincere in our devotion to God and all of his creation and demonstrate it with deeds of charity and kindness. Piety too requires sincerity; it demands self-control over anger and the capacity to forgive. We are not all the same, we are not all believers, yet Islam demands that we treat all with respect. In addition to this God speaks directly to all of humankind and He has endowed all human beings with the capacity to be good and to do good.

"O humankind! We have indeed created you from a man and a woman and made you into nations and tribes to know one another. Truly the most honoured of you in the sight of God is the most righteous." (Quran 49:13)

Our values are the things that we believe, they determine our priorities in life and they are the benchmark by which we measure our success or failure. Islam sets out clearly what is right and what is wrong, what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. When our actions and words are aligned with our values life is generally good and we will feel content. When they don't match up we feel uneasy. Our values serve as a filter through which we make choices thus if we are unhappy or uneasy we can look at our choices to see if they match up with our values and if not make the necessary changes. To be truly content and satisfied we must honour the values defined for us by God.

Prophet Muhammad said if you have no shame then do what you please.^[2]

Psychologists tell us that shame is one of the emotions we feel when we fail to live up to the expectations imposed on us by our belief system and values. This was a message

taught by all of the prophets, have high moral standards and values and use your innate sense of what is right and wrong before making decisions.

The historic role of the Islamic community is to be the embodiment of righteousness. Good values should be seen in every action and heard in every word. Islam defines for us what those values are and teaches us what is the right thing to do in every circumstance.

Footnotes:

[1] P.R. Sanday. (1986) Divine Hunger, Cannibalism as a Cultural System. Cambridge University Press

[2] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

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