

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



For God and Country *An American Muslim Interfaith Address*

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The following address was delivered in August 2011 at an interfaith Ramadan meal hosted by the Islamic Foundation of Villa Park, one of the largest and oldest mosques in the greater Chicago metropolitan area.

In the Name of God, The One who sends mercy on all things, the One who bestows even more mercy on those who turn towards Him.

Praise itself belongs to God, the Lord of all worlds, and may blessings and peace be upon His Noble Messenger, as well as upon the family and companions of the Noble Messenger, one and all.

It is my honor and privilege to be with all of you tonight, and I hope in these few minutes, I can impart something beneficial. It is wonderful to see a diverse group of Americans coming together for a common purpose, and in mutual recognition. For that is what we are – Americans. My forefathers came from England in the 17th century. Perhaps some of your forefathers came from Ireland in the 19th century. And some of you made the journey from India in the 20th century. But nobody gets a different passport for arriving earlier or later. Nobody is subject to different laws because of the country from which they emigrated. What binds us is the Constitution of the United States, which begins: *We, the People*.

There is no “us” nor “them” tonight, only “we.” We have gathered here for a purpose, and that is to honor one of the most beautiful aspects of the American experiment: the right of everyone to worship as they so chose. I affirm the right of people to worship Jesus as Lord, and others affirm the right to let me honor Jesus as a Prophet (may peace be upon him), and we all affirm the right of even others to believe that Jesus was simply a man, just like other men. These are our beliefs, which we cherish more than life itself, and our Founding Fathers envisioned a country where this would be possible.

This is not the first American interfaith iftar. In 1806, Thomas Jefferson invited the ambassador of Tunisia to dine with him at sunset, as it was the month of Ramadan. Thomas Jefferson, a Deist known for his appreciation of the social Gospel, ate with this Tunisian Muslim, and one must wonder what they discussed in that first gathering. And in reflecting on this piece of our heritage, we notice the subtle hints of history, for it is the Tunisians that began the democratic revolution that is now sweeping the Middle East. Just as we threw off the yoke of British imperialism, the Tunisians revolted against an unaccountable dictatorship that strangled their society. They proved to the world, as have the Libyans, the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Yemenis, and the Bahrainis, that Arabs most certainly do not hate American freedoms. In fact, if anyone is keeping alive the spirit of Lexington and Concord these days, it is the brave men and women of the Arab Spring. And I say that as a direct descendant of Joseph Coolidge, may God have mercy on him, who died fighting in the Battle of Lexington and Concord. Just as much as human beings crave water at the end of a day of fasting, we all crave the dawn of liberty while struggling through the dark night of tyranny.

In the days and nights of Ramadan, the spirit and the community are nourished just as much as the mouth and stomach. It is a time where human beings come together in good will and joy. All around the world, Muslims are reaffirming the centrality of family, gathering in the early morning hours and at sunset to eat with their loved ones. People try to outdo one another in feeding the needy, inviting strangers to eat in their homes, or wandering the streets looking for the hungry. Charity is disbursed in abundance, as Muslims believe that a good deed done in the month of Ramadan is multiplied greatly, through the mercy of God. Indeed, Ramadan is generally when one sees the best of the human spirit striving to break free of the chains of selfishness and materialism.

This is a message that is universal, which can also be found in what many refer to as the “Christmas Spirit.” Peace on earth and good will towards men, as is said. These shared values of generosity, mutual concern, and love are what make civilization possible, and no religious or ethnic group has a monopoly on them. They stem from the moral conscience and spiritual flame at the heart of each human being, and are reinforced by the great traditions of history, both religious and secular. And the mutual recognition of this, and the affirmation of that which is good and just in all peoples, is one of the keys to a harmonious global society.

Thomas Jefferson’s first American interfaith iftar provides a blueprint for us tonight, for it is a model of hospitality. And there is even more in our American heritage that we can draw on as well. When the diplomats of the Early Republic concluded a treaty with the Muslim authorities of Tripoli (which is located in Libya), they included the following phrase: *As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion,-as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen...it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.*

These moments in our history remind us that Islam and America have always been linked, and that there is nothing inherently oppositional about America to the second largest faith group on the planet. And again, we take note that this exchange had to do with Tunisia’s neighbor, Libya. Right now, at this very moment, the people of Libya are struggling with their lives and their wealth in order to be free.

The American love for self-determination is strong, whether in regards to Tunisia, Libya, or elsewhere. But we also realize that our own democratic experiment is not over; the cause of liberty is a job always unfinished. When we look back at the intersection of America and Islam, there is a less rosy tale that must be remembered. It is estimated that approximately 645,000 Africans were brought as slaves to the colonies and the early states of the Republic. Of these, it is estimated that approximately 20% of them were Muslim. They were forcibly converted to Christianity, and their cultural heritage was erased. In the 20th century, Blackamericans began converting to Islam in large numbers,

often as a way of reconnecting with their cultural roots. The notables of that generation of pioneers included Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X.

So we remember that while some of us came here by choice, seeking a better life where we could choose to believe what we want and live how we want, there were others who were brought here against their will and told what to believe and how to live. This story is just as much part of the American narrative, and we must never forget that.

As a teenager, one of the things that began my attraction to Islam was the idea that all Muslims were brothers and sisters of one another, regardless of race. There was a particular passage in the Autobiography of Malcolm X that drew my attention. While on the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Makkah, Malcolm reflects: *During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) -- while praying to the same God -- with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the "white" Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana.*

Malcolm (may God have mercy on him) said these words over 40 years ago, but they are still relevant today. The Secret Service reports that there has been a major increase in threats to the President, especially by various shades of white supremacists. The Southern Poverty Law Center recently released a study showing that hate groups are more numerous now than at any other time in American history. Add to this the increase in groups whose explicit goal is the destruction of the federal government in one form or another. And it is in this sort of national climate that we are constantly being told to fear and distrust hard working, honest, law-abiding Palestinians, Pakistanis, Somalis and others. Hatred towards Muslims is only part of a larger complex of nativist prejudice, something, unfortunately, as old as our country. Natives, Blacks, Jews, Irish, Italians, Chinese, Germans, Japanese, Latinos – all have understood what it means to be demonized, stereotyped, feared, and alienated from the ideals of this country. And it is only if we continue to struggle against this social malaise, systematically and systemically, that we will be able to realize the promise of a better life for all Americans.

Ramadan is anathema to racism in all its forms. Ramadan teaches us to set aside all the passions that lead us towards hatred of any aspect of God's creation. And it is a time when people congregate, and try to experience the real meaning of community. And it is time of calling out to God with a sincere heart, an opportunity that is open to all. So in this Ramadan gathering, we must explore the connections between One God, One Humanity, and One America.

One God, because I truly believe that Muslims, Jews and Christians, and many other human beings, worship the same God. As Black Elk, the great Native American mystic, said, "Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have been always, and before you no one has been. There is no other to pray to but you." We may understand some details about the Divine in different ways, but that does not mean that we cannot see beauty in each other's theologies. Islam is not an exclusivist faith, contrary to many popular misunderstandings, even amongst Muslims. Islam teaches that all human beings are born with innate spiritual and moral capacities, and we see that in human history. Just to take one of many possible examples, Augustine, the great Doctor of the Church who is a saint in both Catholic and Protestant traditions, was a great theologian and deeply pious, and no Muslim can look at his legacy and not see a man of God. If we look at his monumental treatise *City of God*, which sparkles with truth in so many places, we see passages like: "But as for the good things of this life and its ills, God has willed that these should be common to all: that we might not too eagerly covet the things which wicked men are seen equally to enjoy, nor shrink with an unseemly fear from the ills which even good men often suffer." This is truth, plain and simple, and we thank God for the wisdom in our varied spiritual traditions. And we are also thankful for all the places wherein God's name is praised. The Qur'an speaks of this, when God says that a balance of power is kept in this world, so that people may gather in all places of worship to hymn God's praises. Protecting churches, mosques, synagogues and temples is a fundamental part of both the Islamic legal tradition and American law.

This understanding of One God helps to binds us as One Humanity because every single one of us is a spiritual being. It is incorrect for a Muslim to consider themselves as better than a person who is not Muslim. Why? Because the basis of our eternal honor comes at the moment of our last breath, and no one knows the meaning of that moment

except God and the angels. It may be that a Muslim renounces faith at the moment of their death, and it may be that an atheist calls out to God in their last moments with such sincerity that she becomes, instantly, beloved of God. And so there is no objective basis to know if any individual is better than another in the eyes of God. As we say in our tradition, Umar was beloved to God even when he was prostrating to idols in Makkah. Why? Because God knew what Umar would become. The point is that we each keep striving to be better, and rely on God at all moments, for God is our only Judge, not other human beings.

The struggle to honor other people as not just your equals, but as better than yourself, is at the heart of Islamic spirituality. Understandably, this is not an easy thing to do, but the reason that God give us moments like Ramadan is so that we may strive for our higher selves. Unfortunately, the ideals of brotherhood and sisterhood are sometimes hard to find in the Muslim community, which suffers from racism as well. I know of a terrible instance where a woman from an immigrant Muslim family wanted to marry a pious Blackamerican Muslim man, and her family categorically refused to entertain the proposal. When the couple persisted, the family resorted to racial slurs and vicious invective. Fortunately, the couple had access to righteous Muslim scholars who were able to advise them that they had the right to get married, and so they did. But this story is only the tip of the iceberg. The desire to see oneself as better than others is not solely a Muslim problem, nor solely an American problem, but is something that afflicts all human beings.

Ramadan is about confronting our most base human instincts, and teaching us that we can master them. If we can abstain from food and drink for 12 hours every day for 30 days, then we can surely learn to treat other human beings with true respect. Human beings naturally do not want to go outside of their comfort zone, physically or socially or intellectually. Ramadan and other authentic spiritual practices come into our lives to push us to become more fully human, more fully as God wants us to be. They take us out of our comfort zones, so that we may grow.

So once we begin to remember that we truly are One Humanity, we can strive more clearly for One America, because finding meaning in diversity is part of our shared quest. America is a gathering place for people from around the world, in a grand

experiment to see if we can get along and realize the words engraved on our country's seal, *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of many, One). Similarly, when Muslims are commanded to gather in Makkah for the Hajj, there is not a separate line for the Black Africans and another for the Pakistanis. No, the rule is that everyone must wear the same clothes and do the same rituals at one time, and there is only one direction of prayer that everyone faces together. America and the Hajj are both symbols of striving towards unity while cherishing diversity, and just as Dr. Martin Luther King called for a nation where people are judged by the content of their character, the Prophet Muhammad said, "a white person has no superiority over a black person, nor does a black person have any superiority over a white person, except by piety and good action."

America is not an Empire. If that were the case, all the people of Afghanistan and Iraq would now have American passports. Rather, America is a Republic which has a responsibility to its incredibly diverse 311 million citizens to protect us from harm, to foster the conditions for economic prosperity, and to allow us to be who we want to be within the limits of the Constitution. Every American has a voice and a responsibility to stand up for the common good, and that is what we are doing here tonight. When we recognize that there is truly One God, we know that we are all equally unable to enumerate His blessings and show gratitude for His favor. In God's presence, we are all like children, needy and incapable. And when we recognize that there is only One Humanity, we can begin to shed our desire to one up each other, revel in our partisanship, or create fault lines of good and evil based on arbitrary classifications. And when we realize that there is only One America, we realize that it is precisely we, the Americans who are gathered here in this room tonight, who must be the vanguard of *E Pluribus Unum*, "Out of Many, One." It is the realization of the golden rule, which in Islam takes the form of a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings be upon him): *no one amongst you has reached the perfection of faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.*

There are enormous difficulties in this project. Selfishness and tribalism will always call out to us to abandon this path. But Ramadan is the month of ideals. Muslims believe that in Ramadan, nothing holds human beings back except the weaknesses within their own selves. So Ramadan is a time of spiritual clarity, for understanding one's

weaknesses is a prerequisite to achieving true spiritual and social change. Ramadan is also considered a preparation for the year ahead, a time to fill one's idealistic batteries to face the challenges of the real world. And so in this blessed month, on this blessed night, in this blessed place, and with this blessed company, let us imagine and hope as deeply as we can, as we envision a better world in the coming year. A world where the people of Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya don't have to die. A world where wealth disparity does not continue growing to the point where it tears our country apart. A world where religion is no longer a tool for identity politics, but regains its purpose as a window into our souls, the universe around us, and the Divine reality which calls out to each of us.

The greatest of Muslim scholars and saints that I have had the privilege of studying with and meeting have never, ever made me question my allegiance to the Constitution of the United States. In fact, they have encouraged me to strive for its ideals. And the greatest of American political and civic leaders have never made me feel that I am less of an American for being Muslim. In fact, they have taught me that America is empowered when its citizens are free to believe and worship and live as they so choose. And it is a shared and mutually reinforcing love for God and country that is so desperately needed. Not my God and my Country, but our God and our Country. The Qur'an states:

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهَ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ



“to God belongs the East and the West, so wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. Truly, God is All-Embracing, All-Knowing.” God is no more present in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, then He is in Villa Park, Illinios, and so in this moment we remember that we are not here without purpose. We are here because, before all this came to be, God willed that we should meet on this night and in this place, for a purpose known in its fullness only to Him. In trying to fathom this Divine purpose, I have shared with you these thoughts, and if anything I said was true and right, then praise for it is due solely to God, and if I have erred in any way or covered over truth with ignorance, then the blame falls squarely on me and no one else. *Wa Allah a'lam* – and God knows best.

May God bless all of you and your loved ones, and may God bless the United States of America, and may God bless all the nations and peoples of Earth, amen.

Thank you, and may peace be with you.