

SPEECH UN: Yasmeen Azam

I greet you with the universal Islamic greeting of Peace,
Assalamu Alaikum wara7matulahi wabarakatu.

Peace and Blessings be upon every single one of you.

I just want to start off by saying I am genuinely humbled to be in this gathering with all of you. As a kid, it has always been my dream to work for the United Nations, so * hint hint* this is a pretty big deal for me. I also want to thank the Institute for this opportunity. Of course, I recognize that standing here amongst all of you is a privilege, and so I pray that God gives me the humility to use this platform for the service of others, and not my Ego.

Growing up a devout Muslim in America, I've been exposed to my fair share of religious intolerance, bigotry, and false stereotyping. Flashbacks of intolerance speckle my childhood memories.

I remember when my father, who has served the community all of his life, was subject to racial profiling every time he went to the airport. I remember when my 13 year old Muslim friend had to defend her religion to strangers when buying a slurpee at 7/11.

I remember when I turned on the TV, post 9/11, and strangers were inaccurately defining my religion to the world for me.

I was aware that to the public, I was solely perceived within the spaces of my hyphenated identity as a Muslim-Arab-American.

My place was reduced to fit within the confines of a binary of being, one accepted and one not. And so a big part of my youth, until today, is attempting to decolonize this idea from within. I deliberately defy this at an introspective level, an epistemic level, and community based level.

Ironically, the very thing that I was marginalized for was the very thing that empowered me. I began to realize that to defend Islam, I didn't have to engage specifically in apologetic rhetoric or "throw my hands in the air and say hey look at me, look at me..I'm just like you, I swear". Essentially, focusing on responding to what Islam IS NOT. Rather, I simply needed to demonstrate WHAT ISLAM IS, irrespective of what others perceive it to be.

I felt the discrimination and kept reminding myself, to change this, it begins with the way I treated the very people that had similar struggles. It's a good thing that my parents were very invested in teaching my siblings and I Islamic history, because I was exposed to many stories on true justice, one of which I will share today.

There was a leader by the name of Omar Ibnkhattab, the second ruler of the Muslims after the death of Prophet Muhammad. He was particularly known for his fairness and egalitarian principles. One time, he heard that there was a dispute between a Coptic Christian man and the son of a man named Amr Ibn As. Amr Ibn As was the ruler of Egypt

at the time and a very close friend of Omar. One time Amr's son, out of sheer haughtiness, whipped a Coptic man for no apparent reason besides exhibiting his power. The Copt complained to Omar, who then summoned Amr and his son all the way from Egypt to Madinah in Saudi Arabia, which was the capital.

After the short trial, Omar ruled in favor of the Coptic man, turning his face to his trusted friend and advisor Amr Ibn Al and uttering one of my favorite quote of all time: "How can you enslave a man when his mother delivered him as a free being?"

Despite the Coptic Christians being a minority in the community, he was treated based on his rights solely and not his "label". This is a powerful reminder that needs to be internalized by our religious and political leaders today.

When you begin to look at the nuances of our tradition, you find they are deeply compatible at the most basic and fundamental levels and they would not resonate with the billions of hearts if that WAS NOT true. The essential truths are universal truths. Truly, religion is ultimately about living a life characterized with righteousness. Whether it's the emphasis on love of others above yourself (Christianity), the discipline of the Self through higher meditation (Buddhism), the embedded sincerity in routine worship (Judaism), or the proclamation of Oneness of God and the humility that comes with it (Islam), all major religions within call for a life of goodness. In fact, in the Islamic tradition, "goodness" actually has a very specific definition. In the second chapter of the Holy Book for Muslims, God says that goodness is believing in the divine message of God and "giving from one's

wealth, in spite of his/her love for it, to the relatives, the orphans, the needy, the traveller, and those who ask for help..." Both of these qualities define a person of faith.

What I want to highlight here is that according to God, believing in the message of God is of *direct* equal caliber with taking care of the weak. If you look at the lives of the prophets, you will find that all of them centered on the weak, the marginalized, the hungry, the poor, the ostracized, the refugee. They were working and living amongst them, helping them not from the sidelines but from within their communities. They repelled the corruption and hatred in their society by proactively working on the often ignored constituents of society.

Jesus said to his disciples that "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Prophet Muhamamd also is a vindication of this. He lived with the poor.

In fact, the first waves of converts to Islam were of the marginalized at the time: women, slaves, and the poor. Later on in his life, he said that "you will be given victory by upholding the weakest amongst you". And that statement in and of itself, was absolutely radical at the time.

1400 years later, and the questions remains: how are we serving the weakest amongst us? You and I: how are we treating the marginalized? Especially here at the United Nations, we must not forget WHY we are here and WHOM we are serving. We need to revive this concept of radical empathy and radical kindness in the way we approach the weakest in our society. Whether that be the janitor in your school university that you walk by without acknowledging, whether it be the Syrian refugee you see on TV, the Palestinian orphan from Ghaza in your community, the young black man in Southside Chicago,

the Latino immigrant father struggling to put food on the table, the homeless man down the street from this very building, or the single mother that happens to be your neighbor.

Regardless of their faith or yours, the heart of it all is about humanizing your brothers and sisters of the human race, despite their “nationalistic/ethnic/religious or political labels” that we love to use nowadays.

It starts by deprioritizing our own comfort and by prioritizing their discomfort. Our religions demand it. As people of faith, WE have to be at the forefronts of this movement for radical love, radical empathy, radical kindness. WE have to WE have to....

That is the ultimate universal struggle for goodness. That is how we take back the religions that are hijacked by those that are not serving others, but only their own Egos. That is how we demonstrate the POWER of religious tolerance.