
Social Justice:
An Islamic Perspective

Dr. Tariq Ramadan

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About Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA)

Established in 1968, the Islamic Circle of North America was a response to the growing need for a supportive Muslim community in North America. The organization initially focused on educating its growing membership about Islam, the goal being to adhere to Islamic values amongst a religiously diverse community. In the early 70s, ICNA members, the majority of whom were of South Asian descent, focused their efforts on education and personal/spiritual development.

In November of 1977, nearly a decade after its formation, ICNA members met and discussed the need for Islamic work based in North America. After drafting and adopting a new detailed constitution, the organization formally became known as the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA). With a new name and new direction, members of ICNA were determined to become an inclusive, diverse organization, and adopted English as their official language. ICNA's work towards establishing a place for Islam in America began.

With the 80s came several key expansion projects—ICNA Sisters' Wing was formed in 1980, ICNA's main headquarters established in Jamaica, Queens in 1984 and the annual convention celebrated its 10th year in 1985. With a central location from which to base its efforts, ICNA was able to launch numerous projects, many of which still thrive today. ICNA Relief, 877-Why Islam, Young Muslims, the National Shura Council, the Message International, Muslim Alert Network, Muslim Savings and Investments (MSI) and more branches were formed throughout the following years to cater to the needs of the American Muslim community. Along with the national convention, clusters of ICNA chapters across North America hosted annual regional conferences; Neighbor Nets were formed for members of local chapters to meet on a consistent basis. 1993 marked a milestone in ICNA's history, as its Charter and By-Laws were approved and adopted.

In the past decade, ICNA has expanded its reach across the US while maintaining an active presence in local communities. Muslim Family Day, first hosted at Six Flags New Jersey in the year 2000, now attracts nearly 50,000 a year at several parks nationwide. The ICNA Council for Social Justice, a branch of ICNA dedicated to representing the Muslim voice on matters of social justice was formed in 2009. ICNA has worked to establish connections between Islam and the public, collaborating with numerous Muslim organizations to reach this end. ICNA also works closely with many national interfaith organizations for the betterment of society. By focusing on self-development, education, outreach and social services, ICNA has cemented its place as a leading grassroots organization in the American Muslim community.

ABOUT ICNA COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

ICNA Council for Social Justice (CSJ) is a social justice/human rights organization that strives to systematically facilitate assertive Muslim involvement in the field of human struggle for the rights of the poor and oppressed in the United States. Established by the Islamic Circle of North America, CSJ enters the social justice/human rights arena in America to cooperate with existing social justice efforts, and organize new initiatives when appropriate, to eliminate barriers to full citizenship rights and privileges, work to restore civil liberties required for a democratic society, and raise public awareness and work to remove the gross inequities of the US criminal justice system.

The mission of all of the Prophets, including the Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdullah (peace be upon him), was to elevate human existence and establish unparalleled just societies through submission to the Creator.

“Oh you who believe! Be standard bearers for Justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, Or your kin, whether it be rich or poor; For Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts, lest you Swerve, and if you Distort Justice or decline To do Justice, verily Allah is well-Acquainted with all that you do.” Qur’an 4:135

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He is active at academic and grassroot levels lecturing extensively throughout the world on theology, ethics, social justice, ecology and interfaith as well intercultural dialogue. He is President of the European think tank: European Muslim Network (EMN) in Brussels. Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the Oxford University (Oriental Institute, St Antony's College) and also teaches at the Oxford Faculty of Theology.

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Social Justice: An Islamic Perspective
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Thank you for the introduction and this invitation.

I'm happy to be here, for many reasons. I'm not going to list all the reasons why I'm happy to be here, because it's a long relationship, not only with ICNA, but with the essence of what brings us together.

It's really important for us to understand the essence of our message as Muslims and which ways we have to be involved in social justice. So let me start with an introduction and just raise some points that are important not only from your frame of reference as Muslims, but also as American citizens.

Understanding Justice

You referred to my last book, *The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism*, and what I tried to do in that book was develop a philosophy of pluralism and to come to an understanding of some of the essential topics of our time quest for meaning, universals, equality, women and men, compassion and spirituality, and one of those topics has to do with justice and the way we deal with justice, and I would say that if you read the different religions, philosophies, and spiritualities, this is where they share a common concept.

We might disagree on some of the dimensions of how we deal with justice because every single philosophy and every single religion has a specific understanding, but even with different understandings, we have a common ground. Be careful of all the new philosophies talking about post-modern approaches which are promoting that there is nothing we can agree on, that there are as many viewpoints as there are human beings. By using a very complicated way of dealing with principles, we are lost. In fact, it might be that this is the purpose of the whole business – to get us lost. But no, it's not like this, we have principles. As Muslims, let us come back to the principles in order to discover what our vision is. The principle is to know our goals, to know our objective.

To be a Muslim in the United States of America

Let us start with this because we, as Muslims, don't agree on one thing. It might be that the great majority of you, because you are here, agree on something, perhaps the essence of our religion. But while talking to other Muslims in other

settings, with other trends, we don't agree on anything. If you are Muslims, wherever you are as Muslims, it means you have to change society for the better...wherever you are. It means if you think that your presence in the United States of America is by accident, then you haven't understood the Divine project intended for you. The Divine project for you is not to be invisible or to be shy or to apologize for being Muslims. It is exactly the opposite. It's to be Muslims in the United States of America, to change and reform the United States of America to be a better society. You are here to contribute, to change, and reform this society. So, while you are praying five times a day, while you are fasting one month a year, when you are praying during the night, it's to help you to get the very essence of this message: change this society for the better. And one of those dimensions here is social justice.

Social Justice: A Continuous Struggle

We have to clear on this: Social justice is not the state of affairs, social justice is an ideal. That is what we are trying to reach. It's an ongoing struggle, a never ending struggle. We are not going to simply be given social justice. It will never be that perfect. So we know that when, for example, we have to struggle against poverty, there is nothing in the Qur'an or the prophetic tradition telling you that one day we will not face poverty. No. Our understanding is it's a challenge. It's something that we have to change. But, to [become] a perfect society where there will be no [more] poor people, we are not told this will happen someday. We are not struggling for a result, we are struggling to reform, and our intention in this is to change and do as much as we can.

We are dealing with a goal, which is helping us to change ourselves and change society, knowing that in this life nothing perfect is going to happen. Absolute justice is with God. This is for Him. For us, it's trying to do as much as we can, trying to reach relative justice.

But what can you do? You have to [do something] and [Muslims are] very quick to quote the verse, "Allah does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity" [Qur'an 2:286]. But be careful, whatever you are able to do, you should. And ask yourself, when you come here and support this organization, have you done what you can? Or is it just a verse behind which you hide? Because it's very easy to say this is what Allah is telling me: I should not do more than I can. But we have to reverse the understanding. Ask yourself, are you doing what you can? Is this the reality of your involvement in this society? It might be that what is perceived and understood as a very easy verse is in fact a very heavy one, very tough, because Allah is asking you: are you pushing yourself as much as you can? Are you doing it? Or are you just trying to find the easiest way to be a Muslim?

So this is the starting point of our discussion, to think about social justice as an objective and an ongoing struggle. You're not going to end it, you will die trying to change this society without reaching your goal.

So why am I saying this? Because the starting point of this struggle is humility. Be humble. But at the same time, be humble with Allah and be ambitious human beings. This is a struggle where we need ambition and humility, and humility and ambition. You have to be humble to the result and ambitious to the struggle. You know why? Because this is the very meaning of tawwakul (reliance) on Allah. Whatever He wants, it's going to happen. If you don't want it and you don't like it, but He wants it, it's going to happen. So it means that everything is possible.

Do It For the Love of God, As the Prophet (pbuh) Did

If the Prophet (pbuh) started with our mindset, our mentality, he wouldn't have gone on to change the world because in the beginning they were [only] five [that believed]. And then they [the disbelievers] said, "We are going to give you whatever you want, but you must stop [preaching]!" He [the Prophet (pbuh)] said, "I'm not going to stop. I'm not. You know why? Because you think I'm working against you. He knows I'm working for Him. So do whatever you want, I'm going to carry on this struggle. Because it's for Him. Put the sun here, the moon here, I'm not going to stop. Your richness, your wealth, is nothing compared to His closeness. This is what I want. I want His love, I don't want your money." So this is the second point, what do you want? To be praised by the people because you struggle for justice or to be loved by God because you respond to His call?

Social Justice: A Condition for Peace

The second thing which is important is to understand why we are struggling for social justice. Social justice is an objective, but it is not an end, per se. It is but a means to get that peace that we want in people, in ourselves, and within our society. Justice is a condition for peace. Justice is a condition for inner peace, to be with our own selves, to be at peace with ourselves, and to be just in society to get social peace. There is no social peace without social justice. So it's a means.

This is why the previous scholars when they were extracting from the texts and the objectives (maqasid), they came up with five or 6 principles which we know and repeat, but there is something else: why do we go beyond our religious community? Because we heard in the Qur'an "we are dignified human beings" not only Muslims, not only believers, but human beings.

When sometimes you go outside, you see people are acting against their own dignity. When you are drunk, because you are losing your lucidity, you are losing your mind, you are acting against your own dignity. But I, in the name of God,

look at your dignity beyond the way you are behaving against it, your dignity is stronger than your behavior. So it might be that I can see the sign of God in your being even while you are acting against your being. And this is why you are serving these beings, sometimes [you have to] go beyond the way they behave. This is why we should go beyond the judgment. Sometimes you have to understand that we respect the beings while disagreeing with the way they behave.

Why would you do this? Because sometimes, in our struggle for the beings, and the dignity of the beings, by respecting the beings, the people may change the way they behave. I may act against my dignity, but if you look at me, the dignity of my being, you might remind me of something that is beyond me and I will come back. If you show that you love me, whatever I am doing, it might make me change my [undignified] behavior. And this is the way the Prophet (pbuh) was doing it. "I look at you beyond what you are doing, and because you see that I am looking at you and I respect your being, you change the way you are." This is why Muslims in this society should be very instrumental in doing this. Stop judging and start acting by respecting the people.

Three Dimensions of Social Justice

In order to look beyond what the people are doing, understand that three dimensions are important: dignity, equality, and well-being.

Humanity is only one. Before God you are all equal, black and white, rich and poor, and the symbol of this is the pilgrimage. At the end of the day, at the center, you are all equal, dressed the same to remind yourselves of the equality which is the basis of Islam. There is no one humanity if there is no equality before God. This is something which is very important [to understand]. Remember how Ali asked the judge, "Don't use the title when you call me and no title when you call this guy. If you call him without a title, you call me without a title." Not like today. As Muslims, we like titles: O Professor, O Doctor, O Sheikh, O 'Allama, and you forget that at the end of the day there is no title before God. Do you think that Allah is calling Professor Tariq? No. It's [just] Tariq.

The only thing [that matters] is that you are brothers and sisters and this is the only title which is known in the Qur'an. "Verily, the believers are brothers" [Qur'an 49:10]. This is the title which is the most important, and brotherhood means what the Prophet (pbuh) did with his companions when they arrived in Madinah. You are the brother of this one. This is equality, love, and mutual support. This is the community. It's not a community of titles, it's a community of feeling and quality, a community of dignity and mutual respect.

The third one is very important to us. Never forget that when you come to speak about social justice in the USA or in any society, it's not only about equality, it's

not only about dignity, it's about well-being as well. Don't forget this dimension in the way we deal with social justice. We often speak about equality, money, poverty, but it's not only about these things.

You can be rich and feel bad. And you are in a society where it is said, according to a survey, that three people out of four need to pay to be heard. What do you think about that? I have to give you money to be heard. My heart is not at peace. There is inner injustice. There is something which is not going right; lack of well-being, perhaps. Give me all the money you want, but at the end, if I don't feel good, there is something missing. For us, this dimension of well-being is critical, it's crucial, in the way we deal with social justice as Muslims.

Don't forget about this [last] dimension. Because when we speak about social justice, we speak about feeling love and spirituality, which is important, but at the end of the day, how is it going to be for the nafs (inner self) of the human being? Will such people have been just with their own selves? Justice with your own self will lead you towards tranquility and feeling good. This is what we want in our society, in our families, in our homes, and also among the people within our community.

Set Your Priorities by Understanding the Society

Talking about all this is good, [but] it's theoretical. Now you live in this country, and we hear these numbers and figures and it's quite alarming; it's worrying what is happening in our society. The problem with Muslims is when we ask them to build mosques, they will give money and when we ask them to build schools, they will [still] give money. But when it comes to this wider struggle among Muslims and Non-Muslims in the name of human dignity, equality, well-being, and our principles, Muslims are very defensive, and [are] not really involved in giving money. Understand that this is a priority of our struggle. What we have to do is be the driving force of the reform in this society. There might be no vision, but the vision will come with a better understanding of this society. There can be no vision in the United States without understanding this country [first] and without understanding what is happening at the local and national levels.

Know Your Religion, Know Your Environment

So you need to have the figures, you need to have a vision, and you have to know the priorities and steps. What are we going to do to change the situation? This is where it's important to know your religion and, at the same time, know your environment. You will see very often that there is a mirroring reality between the inner life and the collective social life. When you come to understand this [concept], [you will realize the meaning behind]: "Our Lord, we have been unjust with our own selves, and if you don't forgive us and show mercy towards us we

are going to be lost” [Qur’an 7:23].

Starting Point: Be Just

We have been unjust with our own selves. What do I mean here? The starting point to be just with our own selves is to acknowledge our own needs. And the first one is the basic need that we have to eat and to drink. It’s something that has to be given by society. If a society is not giving this to human beings, it’s not protecting their dignity. Home, a house, somewhere where you can be protected, that is where you are going to be just with your own self. It’s so important in the society that even when Allah is speaking about love, He is comparing love to a home. “And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought” [Qur’an 30:21]. Look at what is happening in your country. So many people don’t even have a home. They are homeless. In the most industrialized societies today, they are homeless. This is not dignity. This is the starting point of acknowledging that something is going wrong in this country. By the way, the Muslim majority countries are exactly the same. The point is, you are here, and you have to care about what is happening here. We have been unjust with our own selves. Some people have no food, nothing to eat, and are homeless. That is wrong.

Knowledge: Door to Justice

To be just with your mind means to be educated. Education is a right. No human being knows spirituality without education. Spirituality is all about education. You become a spiritual man or woman with and through education. This is a basic right. If you look at your own self, you are not respecting your mind if you are not educating your intelligence. Knowledge is a right, a necessity and an obligation [as the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said], “Asking and seeking knowledge is an obligation of every single man and woman.”

Establish Human Brotherhood

If you want to build a society, you need human brotherhood. And this happened in Madinah. Don’t miss that point. If we want to be just in this society, there needs to be brotherhood, solidarity, and love. And we need to connect social justice with love, mutual respect, and brotherhood. Brotherhood not only means to support your brother or your sister when something goes wrong, it’s to be there just to help people feel they are part of a community. This dimension is very important. We don’t get the essence of what happened in Madinah if we don’t start with Makkah. The people with money were in Madinah and the people who had no money were emigrating from Makkah. People from Makkah had the spiritual message, and the people from Madinah had the social web. And the Prophet

(pbuh) told them they were equal now. The people of Makkah will give their knowledge and the people of Madinah will share their money.

Do We Understand What Brotherhood Means?

Are you sure that, as Muslims, when you speak about brotherhood you are not [only] talking to the people that come from Pakistan or Bangladesh? You go to some Arabs and it's exactly the same, and the African Americans are the same. We have a very narrow understanding of what brotherhood means. Are you able to look at non-Muslims and think beyond [their] behavior, that you came from the same source, and that at the end of the day there is only one God for all of us? I can look at you beyond our differences. I respect who you are but I disagree with what you are doing. I don't like what you are doing but I am respectful of this dignity for human beings. This is brotherhood. Spirituality is part of this.

Spiritual Dimension of Brotherhood

As Muslims living in this country, don't speak about social justice while forgetting to speak about the spiritual dimension. What is spirituality when it comes to social justice? It means: why are you doing what you are doing? Let the people understand that you respect them, but you are not the creator of this world. Let them understand that you are doing this because there is a meaning here, a driving force, and a light in your heart. It's important to not be shy about showing this. We are not here to convert people, but we are here to serve the people. In the name of God, we are here to serve the lost ones, to serve the poor, the marginalized, and the people who are not seen. He tells us to look at the people who are not seen by others. This is the meaning of spirituality and this is why, as Muslims, we should be an added value in this dimension.

Lessons from the Story of Lubaba

It's also to connect all our struggles to a dimension which is not only [limited to] this obsession with rights, but something which has to do with a deep feeling of love. In my book *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*, there was one story which was very important for me when I tried to translate which kind of lessons we could learn from it. It's the discussion with Lubaba, [one of] the companion[s] of the Prophet (pbuh), and when the Prophet (pbuh) was to leave Medina, he was to leave Lubaba in charge of the city. However, a problem occurred during the Prophet's absence. A poor man came and said, "Lubaba wants to take the fruit tree, the palm tree which he says is his. [But] this is the only thing that I own." But Lubaba said, "No, this is mine." After they checked, it turned out Lubaba was right so he wanted the palm tree back. The Prophet (pbuh) told him to give it to him [anyway], but Lubaba refused because it was his right. One of the companions was there listening to this

[whole] discussion and he said to Lubaba, “I’m going to buy your palm tree and I’ll give you all my trees for that [one] palm tree.” This companion took Lubaba’s tree and gave it to the poor man.

What’s the lesson? Lubaba was right, and Lubaba was wrong. Lubaba was right in the name of justice, but as for spirituality, he was wrong. Allah commands justice and ihsan (doing things in the best way). Here was the ihsan. Sometimes you have to go beyond justice. Be careful, justice is not an end, per se. It should be a condition and a means. And this was a companion [i.e. Lubaba] who was very close to the Prophet! The Prophet (pbuh) was sad to see him act this way and this is the paradox. It’s very paradoxical.

Abu Tharr Did Not Get the Job, But Why?

[Do] You know Abu Tharr? Abu Tharr was strong against injustice. He was known among the companions as someone who was very strong acting against corrupt leaders. But then, once he asked the Prophet (pbuh) for a leadership position, [He was told] “You are weak, and it is an amanah (trust), and on the Day of Judgment it could be your regret.” Look at that! In the situation of counter power, he was strong, but when he asked for power, what was the reaction of the Prophet (pbuh)? Dealing with rights? No. [It’s] dealing with psychology. [He is being told that] “You are strong when it comes to oppose; you are weak when it comes to impose.” The same man. Understand that, because this is what we need when it comes to understanding Islam.

Islam is not only about right and wrong. It’s not about [only] justice, it’s about psychology, education, dignity, spirituality, love, and brotherhood. It’s all that together. So we need to come to a deep understanding of our religion, not only superficial. For years, I had been repeating that Islam is justice whenever I was asked what Islam is. But when I wrote this book about the Prophet (pbuh), it changed my mind. Islam is about peace, and justice is but a condition. But it’s a very imperative and necessary condition. A multifaceted condition.

Communication: The Key to Seeking Social Justice

Have you ever looked at what sometimes happens in jail or gone to listen to those who are in jail? Yesterday I was in Minnesota and I was talking to youth from the Somali background and they told me about the gang culture there. In the United States, this is a problem. In Europe, some are scared of the Islamization of Europe, others are scared of the Americanization of the suburbs. We have gangs and weapons and it’s very worrying. We see the problem with the youth, the lack of communication, no respect, and not being heard in schools, for example. So some are becoming violent, some are turning to drugs, and some are going to shake this society because they are not heard.

Communication is the starting point in social justice, especially in our mosques, churches, schools, and families. Are you sure you give enough space for your kids to be heard, to speak out, to respect you – not in silence – but to respect you by being critical? If you think your kids respect you because they are silent, you are dreaming or fooling yourself. The true respect with parents is to be able to speak your mind and to be respected. This communication is so important. We are in a society with lots of means of communications, yet less actual communication. And that is paradoxical. It's the time of Facebook. We communicate, but don't sit and look at one another. It's the time of being anonymous, while today we need to be perceived. When someone came with nothing, just a question, the Prophet (pbuh) was there to listen. And the one time that he didn't listen to a poor old blind man [who had come to the Prophet (pbuh) to learn the religion], Allah told him [meaning of which is], "You talk to the rich and you forget the sincere one. He has nothing, he has no name but he has dignity." You know this story [referring to the incident that caused 80th chapter of the Qur'an (Surah 'Abasa) to be revealed].

What Next? Act.

So what do we have to do in the States, now that we know all these parts of our religion? It's not easy, it's very complex. It's a comprehensive approach that is needed. How do we deal with the basic needs? Education? Spirituality? Dignity? Communication? Love? Brotherhood? The potential in this society to achieve something and to be recognized and dignified in this society will not be reached just by sitting here and saying Islam is all about justice.

You Are Here to Serve and Not Be Liked

Stay close to God consciousness. Check your feelings and impose your understanding. Do not let hatred push you to be unjust. Whatever is happening in this society with those who are spreading around bad messages and negative perceptions about Islam, don't let that drive you towards something which is not just. Be careful. Some people want you to feel [like an] alien in this society. By adding negative perceptions about Islam so that you feel, "Oh Americans don't like us," it's a psychological war. You are not here to be liked, you are here to serve! And because you serve, you are going to be respected and liked.

So be careful – there is a psychological war, and it has [only] one objective: to make you feel that you are not part of this society, that you are the "other" and that you enter society through the margin. You are not in the margin! All you state here is mainstream discourse with universal values. And then from the text, "O, you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah is more worthy of both. So follow not [personal] inclination,

lest you not be just. And if you distort [your testimony] or refuse [to give it], then indeed Allah is ever, with what you do, Acquainted” [Qur’an 4:135]. This is a self-critical approach, so in the name of justice before God, you have to show a critical stand towards your own self, your father, your relatives, and the people you love.

The Four Dimensions of Zakat

We all know zakat, and we speak about zakat as a means to implement justice, because zakat is something important to both: the spirituality of the rich and the right of the poor. This is why zakat translated as charity is problematic. There are four dimensions of zakat.

It’s a purifying social tax. It’s not charity. It’s not alms, as we [usually] translate it. That’s wrong. You have to pay it to purify your money in order to help society towards justice. Zakat is very important for us. It’s a haqq, a right that the poor have on society. [For example,] Wherever you are, you pray. You pray in the USA to the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Zakat is exactly the same.

If you understand the very essence of zakat, it’s not to take the money and send it back to Pakistan. Do this with your sadaqat (voluntary charity). Zakat is for the poor people here, and that is why it’s important. It is taken from the rich of society for its poor. So wherever you live, you need to know the poor people around you. It’s only for exceptional situations that you send your zakat overseas; otherwise, it should be given in America to the poor especially the Muslims, because you have lots of [poor] Muslims here. And don’t tell me, “Oh, there are not so many poor Muslims in America.” Are you blind? The problem is you only look at the people around you who may not be poor. But there are so many new immigrants, Somali Brothers and Sisters, Pakistani Brothers and Sisters, African-American Brothers and Sisters. They are poor and have a right to your money. Your money is for them first. If you have more money [leftover] to send to Pakistan, then you send your sadaqat. But the zakat is [for] here. This is an imperative of your religion.

When you understand the very essence of zakat, you [will be in the] need to understand your society. You need to be rooted in America to know the poor people around you, because they have a right to your money. And you have the spiritual obligation to give that money to the people here.

The fourth dimension of zakat is not only to assist you to be just, to have a better evening, or a better festival or Eid. The very essence of zakat is to help the people receiving the zakat to be autonomous and that they pay the zakat [eventually] themselves. Zakat is a means towards autonomy. It is not a way to keep [giving] assistance. And this is why we don’t get it. The way we implement zakat and pay

zakat is wrong today because we don't get the philosophy. What we have to do is take the money and fund projects to help the people to be autonomous. And the Chinese proverb, and every time I saying this I have to add, it's a Chinese proverb which is Islamic in substance. [Hence,] It's an Islamic Chinese proverb. "Don't give the poor people fish, but teach them how to fish." To be autonomous. It is exactly what we need. Zakat is for that.

If you learn all this, how are you going to implement this in this country? Within the community, how are you going to use zakat? If you are working for social justice, [you need to ask yourself] how do you deal with zakat? And not only this, but how do we deal with the society [at large]? Let's just look at some points that are critical in this society.

Jihad Against Poverty

The first is that there are too many poor people in this country. I was just reading the figures. 46 million people are hungry in this country. [This is] unacceptable. So we need to have a strategy at the local level. Muslims as American citizens have to try and do something. It should be within the community and also outside of it. This should not be done only during Ramadan. Ramadan is a school for the next eleven months. We are so nice during Ramadan [yet] absent during the next 11 months. We are transforming Ramadan to a month between brackets, which is exactly the opposite. It is a school to help us be present the whole year. So this is where we have to come up with a strategy for a jihad against poverty in the United States of America.

We did this in Mauritius [in the past]. We launched [a campaign] with Christians, Buddhists, Chinese people, coming from different backgrounds, a jihad against poverty, because jihad here has the right meaning. We are struggling against a common enemy. The common enemy is poverty. Let us come together. Let them use the concept of jihad with us. Yes, it is a jihad. You know you have priests in South America speaking about a war against poverty. So this is a struggle [we should strive for].

Education Reform

The second thing which is important for us is education and here we have a problem. Justice is not to give you the same rights only. It's to have the same opportunities [as well]. You have to look at where the people are [in their current situation], from where they are starting, [and how much they are going to need] in order to get to a certain level. It is not only to give everyone the same, [rather,] it's to give some of them more because they are starting from far [less]. It's to adapt what you are giving to give them the same opportunities, and in education it's quite important.

I'm sorry to tell you, though you probably already know this, the American educational system is problematic. You have private schools for the rich, and second class schools for the poor. And the only answer from Muslims when it comes to schools is, "You know what, we have our Islamic schools." It's not going to work. You are going to be living in [a] parallel [situation], in the margin of society, while 90 percent of Muslim kids will continue to go to the mainstream school system. They are facing exactly the same problems, so are you going to forget about all the people who don't have [the] money [for private schools] or are you going to be involved in something which has to do with reforming the educational system? This is why we need teachers. We need people to be involved in this and be creative. Education is a key factor of social injustice and this is why you have to be involved.

End Racial Discrimination

We need to be courageous. To deal with social justice, we need to deal with racial discrimination. It means you need to speak about power in this country and challenge the power with courage. We are not going to be loved by everyone just because we speak about social justice. I'm seeing now that Muslims just want to be liked and please the people. No! You have to stand up for rights. You have to challenge the power and speak out when it does anything wrong.

We have racial discrimination in this country, it's still a reality. It's not over just because you have a president who is now the first African-American President. This is a symbol, it's a symbol hiding the reality of millions of people who are facing racial discrimination. Many of the brothers and sisters in humanity are facing this [type of discrimination], yet they are forgotten by the Muslims. If you do not change racial discrimination within your [own Muslim] community, you will not be able to change it in the U.S. Face the reality of racism which is [extensive] in [our] community. If we want to change this society for the better, we have to tackle this and work together.

Start Building Bridges

I would like this organization, and any organization, to bridge with other African-American Muslim organizations to work together and to say it is our struggle. With so many people, with converts, with people in jail, this is our job. But if you do not have something, you cannot give it. So if you don't have openness towards racial issues, you are not going to change the country. I've heard of so many African-American Muslims who are not happy with us. They feel that they are second class Muslims. So what are you going to teach the people? How are you going to change anything in this society? If you want to be integrated [in this society] as all the other Americans, then being neglectful about this [issue] is not going to bring about integration. It is dissolution. It is destruction. There is

no sense in this. This is not the way forward.

Stop Geographical Segregation

Sometimes you come to Washington D.C. and it feels so nice, but only if you don't go to specific areas. It's exactly the same in every single city in this country. Social and geographical segregation are important when it comes to social justice. The people say, "Oh, let us live together." Who do you want to live with? Who are these people you are talking about? [You see] It is easy here. You are not at risk. But when it comes to segregation in geographical areas, we are putting people from the same background in areas where they are going to have social problems, gangs, and violence. This is the reality of our society even if we don't want to see it. Have you [not] seen this in our community? We speak about the Madinan experience, where were the poor during the Prophet's (pbuh) time? They were around the mosque! The Madinan mosque of the Prophet (pbuh), that you visit in Madinah, was where the poor were, [right] in the center, in front of the whole community. Today, we want to accept that they are far from us and [as if] we don't see them. Are you going to accept that? Are you [going to claim to be] integrated that much while forgetting the reality of social justice? So this is the fourth field in America which is important.

Work to End Discrimination Against Women

There is another field which is important. Very often, the people speak about Islam and Muslims segregating and discriminating against women. It is true that in our community there is something which is not right [about this issue]. But if there is something that we have to do in this society, it is to allow the same skills, the same competency, and the same salary. There should be no discrimination in the job market. This is also social justice. Let the Muslims be at the forefront of this struggle. If you work, you should have the same salary as those who have the same competency and the same skills.

Address Domestic Violence

We speak about the headscarf. As if it is the only thing that's important. It's an Islamic obligation no doubt about it, but if you are under the psychological pressure that they are pushing you to speak only about this, you are falling into a trap. Let us speak about the essential thing, which is for example, domestic violence. Who is beating the woman? Is it happening in our community? Yes. But not only in our community. This is a universal disease. Let us come as Muslims in the name of social justice against domestic violence. Be on the offensive. Be assertive with the Islamic principles by showing that you are serious about it. Serious means, 'we mean it and are doing something about it.'

Give, Share, and Welcome

The United Nations started something which is changing the parameters and the scale on which we set the development of a society by talking about the human development index. They are saying that well-being and how you feel in the society [is interconnected]. We need to say social justice is also about this: brotherhood and communication. Let us come with what we had in the countries of our origin: generosity, welcoming the people, sharing and not being selfish. We are colonized the wrong way. We should have colonized the United States with generosity, but we are colonized with selfishness and individualism. It should be the other way around. We have to change that.

So this is where social justice is also about feeling and about sharing with the people. But we have to change ourselves first by being able to communicate and listen. We need to understand that communication is one dimension of social justice. No communication, no social justice. No people to hear, no social justice. No people to talk, no social justice. This is another dimension which is important.

Seek Religious Equality for All

Do not forget religious equality because it is also important. Remember, President Obama said that in the United States of America, every single religion should have the right to exist and express itself. Struggle for that. Don't let the people have one [form of] freedom for some, and another [form of] freedom for others. This is [a struggle for] social justice as well.

Religious equality is [so] important that it is the only survival of the United States. If you accept discrimination [against religion], it's over. You have to be at the forefront of this struggle for yourself and for other religions. But to do this, there are three requirements:

Firstly, we have to do it for all. We are serving the society and we want the United States to be a better society tomorrow, because this society is the future for our kids and the kids of our fellow citizens. So it's something which is a vision for Muslims and non-Muslims.

Secondly, we have to promote an added value in our citizenship and its ethics. We [should] know our duties and not only ask and claim our rights. This is where we have to come with ethics.

Lastly, social justice is about being courageous. [Today,] I'm here to support this work in the dimension that we have to be involved in social justice [related work]. There is something that I keep on repeating to the Muslims: we have one [major] problem in the West that there is a lack of knowledge and not knowing

enough about our [own] religion. But if we were more courageous, we would come back to that knowledge. You know why? Because when you are courageous and you are facing the problem, you are facing the challenge, you understand the lack of knowledge that you have and you come back to knowledge. It might be because there is a lack of courage that we accept a lack of knowledge. With more courage, we would come back to knowledge. Because you cannot face the challenges if you are not equipped, and intellectual strength is very important.

So I would say to the Muslims here, ask yourself, are you doing what you can, and do you have the necessary courage to face these challenges and to do the work? This is an Islamic understanding in a specific environment, your environment, as American citizens and this is where you should be an added value insha'Allah.

