

**Remarks by Dr. Ingrid Mattson, President, Islamic Society of North America
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“Our Sacred Responsibility to Our World”

May God’s peace be with you.

I have been asked to speak today about “Our sacred responsibility to our world.” This is an awesome topic and I can only offer a few remarks about some lessons I have learned about what we need to keep in mind as we engage the world.

In the year 2002, I went on a study tour to China. I visited beautiful places and met of interesting people. The trip was in many ways, a lesson in humility. Although I have benefited throughout my life from wonderful educational institutions and I read a great deal about history and follow current events, I was confronted with how little I know about this ancient civilization and dynamic modern nation.

But there was another thing I learned on that trip that has stuck with me until now – something I learned about America and the way this nation is portrayed and perceived in other parts of the world. For at least four or five days, every time I turned on the Chinese news channel, there was one image of America that was played over and over and over. This was the image of a Black man in California having his head repeatedly smashed against his car by the police who stopped him along the highway.

I was so frustrated that this was the only image of America that was being shown to the Chinese people, as if America is a place of unending police brutality and racism. This is neither to deny that those things exist, nor to deny the terrible fact of this particular incident, but, I asked myself, when would we be shown the many Americans, including other police officers, who denounced this brutality? When would we be shown the public servants and ordinary citizens who were working hard to ensure better justice? And when would we be shown the many great things that happen each day in America?

The Ninth Commandment prohibits “false witness;” Islam, sharing the Abrahamic tradition, affirms the content of the Ten Commandments – the Prophet Muhammad said that false witness is among the worst of sins, along with idolatry, dishonoring parents and murder.

This is a commandment, however, that perhaps does not get the attention it deserves. In fact, most brutality is founded on false witness – declaring about the other what is simply not true, but offers a justification for oppression and mistreatment. Throughout the world, and throughout history, the intelligence and humanity of certain classes of people has been denied in an act of false witness in order to deprive them of their human rights.

Before we can hope to have any positive impact on the world, we therefore need to expand our knowledge of those with whom we share this earth. We cannot know about the other, without knowing the other. Engagement, dialogue and personal interaction allow for us to know others as they see themselves, as Martin Buber taught us, to engage with others as subjects, not as objects.

As Americans and as people of faith, we need to support policies and programs that offer many more opportunities for this kind of engagement and authentic knowing. I think about the impact, for example, of a group of young Syrian Muslim women who came for graduate studies to Hartford Seminary, where I teach. Not only did they have the opportunity to study about Christianity from faithful Christians, but as part of the Abrahamic program, for the first time in their lives, they visited synagogues, as well as churches, where they engaged with ordinary congregants and witnessed worship services. There were some deeply emotional moments, especially when each group expressed their views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But, because they were safe, equal partners in dialogue in this country, and supported by committed mentors from the religious and academic institutions, the parties were able, perhaps for the first time, to hear each others fears and pain.

No longer could American Jews be distant nefarious characters in the minds of these young Syrian students – they were flesh and blood elderly Holocaust survivors whose stories moved them to tears and they were intelligent inquisitive young students like themselves. And as one of the Jewish participants told me, while before he always had only negative associations with Syrians, now he was more hopeful that some day there could be peace because of the compassion and intelligence that he had come to know in these young women.

A program like this needs the support and participation of many parties: the US government to issue visas to students from such countries, academic institutions, to ensure that their educational missions encompasses the global challenges we face, and ordinary faith communities, who are willing to open their houses of worship, and even more importantly, to open their hearts and minds to learning about others. This is the form of engaged religious pluralism that Princeton professor Robert Wuthnow advocates – and I can testify that it works – that it will make us better carriers of the prophetic tradition and better Americans.

Avoiding false witness also means that we not only tell the truth, but we tell the whole truth – that is, that we acknowledge what is wrong and work to change it, but we also bear witness to what is right. And, as the Chinese newscast demonstrated to me, we have to work hard to broadcast the good news, lest the bizarre, the brutal and the bombastic dominate the news. The truth is that we should not be naïve about the challenges we face, but we should also not be cynical. The truth is that there is much cause for hope for a better world and this is the witness we should bear.

In the last few years, when I have travelled overseas to Muslim countries, or when I have engaged with delegations of State-department sponsored Muslim visitors to this country,

I have often been asked one question – and this question has been asked in whispers: “How are Muslims in America making out?” They tell me about the news they have heard of American Muslims being harassed when they travel, of hateful tirades against Muslims on some radio and television programs, of discriminatory government policies – like special registration -- against Muslims.

I am an honest person, and so this is what I have been able to respond: “Yes, there have been problems, but America is still the best place to be a Muslim.” If policies that are discriminatory are enacted, there is the rule of law and a magnificent court system in which those policies can be challenged. If there is hate speech, there is also free speech, that allows us to correct the record and give our side of the story. If there are those who oppose us, there are also those who stand up for us – and in the last number of years, many Christian and Jewish Americans have stood up for the rights of their Muslim neighbors – to be treated equally and with respect.

How important is it that I am able to proffer these and other example of moral courage and leadership that Americans have taken in the last few years? Without these examples, it is so easy for others to state that American ideals are no more than rhetoric.

Americans have, perhaps, a greater responsibility to act with ethics, courage and integrity than any other people in our time, not because we are essentially better as individuals, but because as a nation, we have been truly, that beacon of hope for a more just, democratic and free future for people throughout the world. Our actions are magnified and amplified like the actions of no other nation. We need to be, as much as humanly possible, a shining example of justice, equality and rule of law.

Our sacred responsibility to the world is, therefore, to first come to know others, to engage them in honest dialogue and interaction, and then, to live up to our values of justice, equality and the promotion of human dignity, to give hope to others and to undermine those who cynically magnify our mistakes to justify their own oppression.

Finally, our sacred responsibility to the world is to confront injustice certainly – but to do so – as someone [Barack Obama] said recently in his conversation in a church – with humility. There is evil, no doubt. And it saddens me deeply that there is much evil that is being done in our time in the name of my religion. I not only have to acknowledge that and denounce that evil, but work, with other Americans to ensure our common interests and security. This is why I am proud of the American Muslim community, which is serving in this country in all areas – in public service, in the Department of Homeland Security, in the FBI, in the State Department, and in the US military; Muslim Americans have fought and died alongside other Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq and we are proud of their service.

Yet when we confront evil, we need to make sure that we do not ruin the lives of countless innocent people and destroy the planet – God’s creation – in the process.

The Qur'an has an instructive story about King Solomon as he was marching his armies out to battle. Solomon was a prophet, a righteous king, and a wise ruler. When he employed force, he did so for the cause of justice. However, one day, as he was advancing his massive battalions across the land, they approached a valley that was inhabited by ants – and here, the Qur'an takes the perspective of the ants – one of whom calls out to the others saying, "O Ants, quickly get inside your homes so that Solomon and his armies do not crush you without realizing it."

Whether we are using military force, or simply employing power to run our cars and factories, we can, without realizing it, do a great deal of damage. Our sacred responsibility to the world is to learn that lesson in humility so that we can do better.

And we need to do better, because there are so many people in the world who need our help. We have magnificent researchers who have developed treatments for some of the worst diseases from which so many millions of people are suffering. We have a great scientific and technical sector that is capable of providing new solutions to the energy needs of poor people around the world. We have great wealth and other advantages in this country. We will be welcome by the people of the world if we come to them with respect and compassion.

May God bless you and may God bless America.