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**Religion and Civil Rights: Challenges and Duties
For the Religious Community**

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I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to His Royal Highness, the Emir of Qatar and to the organizers, especially Dean Aishaa Yousef Al-Manae, for extending me their kind invitation and opportunity to attend and present at this very special and important event.

The promotion and support of civil rights can be a dangerous enterprise. One need only evoke the memory of Martin Luther King and Gandhi to understand the possible ramifications of such a pursuit, to say nothing of the countless individuals who are vilified, demonized and persecuted even as they themselves fight for the persecuted. I would like to take an example of a recent incident to illustrate how religionists face this dilemma.

As reported a few days ago, Sudanese Islamic scholar, Hasan al-Turabi, faces possible charges of apostasy in his native Sudan. What was his offence in the eyes of the religious council? Turabi had the apparent audacity to declare that women are equal to men in Islam and that Muslim women were permitted to marry Christian or Jewish men. It seems as though Turabi's assertions of gender equality through Islamic sanction was a step too far. In Islam, there is perhaps no greater criminal consequence than what accompanies a charge of apostasy. It is punishable by death as it is considered to be tantamount to treason, a capital offense in every nation that may be considered political apostasy.

Turabi's current troubles epitomize the difficulties that confront those who champion civil rights, be they in defense and support of women, co-religionists, members of other faiths or of any other suspect group whose rights have been marginalized, deprived, denied or usurped.

When examining the challenges associated with the support of civil rights, one needs to be mindful of the existence of two levels of difficulty: (1) Promoting and supporting civil rights for one's own community or group; and (2) Promoting and supporting the civil rights of other groups or faith traditions.

In the first case, one must recognize that even the support of the civil rights of one's own religion or group is no easy task. Whether confronting a state that is secular and intolerant of religious expression, a co-religionist state with a different, often hostile, religious or political orientation or an exclusivist state with a different dominant faith tradition, the civil rights supporter faces opposition. In some circumstances, the opposition comes from within one's group. Accused of being an agitator or troublemaker, some co-religionists do not see the importance of having their own civil rights championed or fear reprisal and retaliation for invoking such ideas. Ironically, once the rights are achieved, everyone wants to take credit or claim participation.

If the civil rights supporter faces such obstacles for engaging in this pursuit, imagine what are the challenges associated with the support of the rights of a people or a position that is outside his or her own affiliation. Slurs and accusations of betrayal, distraction, misguidedness and dual loyalty are anticipated reactions. There is also the disbelief of the person's co-religionists who may not understand why anyone would, could or should care about anyone not belonging to their own group. Of course, all of the resistance and hostility witnessed in the first case are revisited.

For many Muslims in the United States, civil rights constitutes a "New World" which they have only recently discovered. The majority of American Muslims today are immigrants or children of immigrants, having arrived since the 1960's, specifically, after the Civil Rights movement. They were not part of that struggle, as were other Americans including their fellow "native" Muslims- Black Americans. Tragically, immigrant Muslims ignored the contributions of their co-religionists, as well as other

civil rights activists of different faiths, who changed the American legal and political landscape so that even immigration laws were modified to allow easier entry into the country for many Muslims. This lack of connectivity to the civil rights movement in America has been detrimental to Muslims in that country to understand fully how a civil rights movement needs to be conducted.

A second factor involving Muslims and civil rights is that for many of the immigrant Muslims, civil rights was "discovered" only after September 11, when their own civil rights and civil liberties were under threat. All of a sudden, one could not enter a mosque or a Muslim home without the subjects of civil rights and the USA Patriot Act looming heavily on everyone's minds. Before 2001, many Muslims who were engaged in civil rights movements did so primarily, if not exclusively, when they pertained to Muslim issues. Such neglect in looking beyond the community has cost the Muslim community in America dearly. It led to a delay in garnering people's sympathy and understanding of the plight facing Arab and Muslim Americans after 9/11. Despite the erosion of civil liberties that could affect all Americans, Muslims had difficulty persuading society that the issue was on a national scale.

Fortunately, there were those outside the American Muslim community who took up the cause of the protection of civil liberties and helped support, assist and educate the Muslims in the struggle for justice. At the same time, this fact shows the dangers when one takes for granted the efforts of people outside one's group championing another's civil rights or worse, treats such support with suspicion, cynicism or skepticism. Sadly, there is a tendency for some to question the motives of others despite the eagerness to enjoy the benefits of their earnest efforts. It is quite possible that the person fighting for the rights of another religious group or another gender is doing so with the only motive being for the pleasure of God (*Fi-Sabil-illah*). Who then should be viewed with suspicion, cynicism and skepticism- the benefactor or the beneficiary of these pursuits?

Yet, there is certainly much to be acknowledged and commended in the areas where civil rights and justice have been championed across religious lines. Christian and Jewish advocates defending Muslims after 9/11 in detention and terrorism cases; Muslims protecting Jewish minorities in India and Christians in the Balkan wars; Christians protecting Jews during World War II are but a few examples of

cooperation and mutual aspirations for the support of civil rights, not only one's own, but if others as well.

It has been asserted at this conference that no group holds a monopoly on suffering. Similarly, no one group has the monopoly on conducting successful civil rights movements nor should any one group be burdened with such a task. It is a collective effort that requires mutual cooperation and engagement. For religionists, there is no choice. To assert a right, one must invoke a duty that has been handed down to all by their Creator. Justice must be championed, by act, word or at the very least, by the heart. It is said that justice is blind, without regard to the caste, creed or color of the individual or group involved. This is the formula to be used by the pursuers of justice, especially those who answer the divine command to do so.

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