

Refai Arefin - Law Day Remarks - 05/01/13

May it please the Court, Good Morning. Peace and blessings of God be on all of you. I am deeply honored and privileged to speak at the Connecticut Supreme Court, as intimidating as the room is. But my fellow Connecticuters, my fellow Attorneys and my fellow Americans, I am also deeply proud. I stand before you all this morning as the product of an American dream of equality, the child of an immigrant from Bangladesh and an immigrant from Guyana and a marriage that could only happen in New York City. I stand before you as a member of "We the people", and in the words of Lincoln, an inheritor of the proposition to which our nation is dedicated.

This dream of equality, which remains elusive, is long in the making. This year we mark the 150th anniversary of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. A hundred years later, in 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood before the Lincoln Memorial calling for a vision of equality for all.

Dr. King was not the very first to call for equality and justice for all, though he was one of its most important voices. God revealed in the Qur'an:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ (49:13)

O mankind! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware.

God tells us in the Qur'an that he endowed each and every human being with inherent dignity in their person and their soul. God challenges us in scripture to look beyond stereotypes to see people with their God-endowed dignity.

It is a message that the Muslim Coalition of Connecticut has taken to heart. This year, we served thousands of meals at Mercy Shelter here in Hartford, distributed hundreds of towels and socks to the homeless, raised

thousands of dollars for the hungry, assisted for days at Habitat for Humanity work sites. We have also taken a stance unequivocally against all forms of terrorism, by denouncing terrorism within our community. We organized the state interfaith gathering entitled United in Peace, Healing with Hope on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 which drew over a thousand people from all walks of life as well as mosque open houses throughout the state. Most recently, the Muslim Coalition has taken a strong stance against the heinous loss of life at the Boston Marathon. We have also endeavored to highlight social issues of common concern, including healthcare, domestic violence, the environment and working with law enforcement to foster safer communities. As a result, we have earned praise from both the Connecticut Legislature as well as Governor Malloy.

MCCT shares that dream of equality under the law for all. Yet, at this moment, while the Judicial Branch honors the Muslim Coalition, there are 32 states in which 92 bills have been introduced directed at preventing what paranoid lawmakers call “creeping sharia law.” Over the past two years, six states have enacted laws that directly prevent Muslims from practicing sharia, which covers how Muslim pray, eat and carry out their religious worship. Why these states have any compelling state interest in policing how Muslims practice their religion is beyond me.

What does make sense to me is that the charge against sharia is funded by Attorney David Yerushalmi who amassed \$42 million to lobby legislatures across the country to prevent this creeping sharia. The stated mission of the nonprofit law firm is - and I quote - “to fight for faith and freedom by advancing and defending America’s Judeo-Christian heritage and moral foundation.”

Hatred and xenophobia always comes from a place of ignorance, it always has. Little do Islamophobes realize that Muslims have been part of the fabric of the United States since the time of this Nation’s inception.

When Jefferson and James Madison first proposed the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom, which the First Amendment is modeled after, Patrick

Henry and some others wanted to substitute the words “Jesus Christ” for “Almighty God” in the opening passage, but the measure was overwhelmingly voted down, by many including President George Washington. Jefferson later wrote that the representatives wanted the law to include within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Muslim, the Hindu and Infidel of every denomination. Equality for All - that was what the founding fathers intended. The freedom of each person to practice his or her religion without tyranny. It is fair to state that Thomas Jefferson would be disgusted by today’s stereotyping of Muslims.

The question many ask is why should they care about Islamophobia and why should Muslims care about stereotyping against others groups. As Rev. Dr. King pointed out in his letter from a Birmingham Jail, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Equality under the law is only meaningful if it extends to all people, however vilified they are.

In reflecting on the Emancipation Proclamation, I remember the words of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that: All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor does a black have any superiority over a white except by piety and good action. Similarly, God states in the Qur’an that whoever leads a righteous life, male or female, shall attain salvation without the slightest injustice.

As Muslims, we are faith-bound to prescribe to basic principles of equality and fairness, which we carry out by serving our communities. Each of us has our own way of improving lives. I like to believe I do so for my clients by litigating their cases and giving them a voice when they feel helpless. Then there is also my wife, who works closely with the Department of Children and Families as a senior counselor at Wheeler Clinic, helping families get back on track. By doing so, we fulfill not only a civic duty, but also a spiritual one.

When President Eisenhower issued the Law Day proclamation in 1958, he called on us to reflect proudly upon the legal system we inherited from the founding fathers. In that time of fear of communism, he may not have realized that democracy and liberty, however imperfect, would reign throughout the world - from Budapest, to Moscow, to Cairo. Connecticut is now the second most unequal state by income in the union and our schools remain some of the most unequal. The dream still needs to be realized and needs to be kept alive if we ever hope for equality to be a reality. While the courts play a role in acting as a check against runaway lawmakers, it is ultimately you and I, citizens, who hold the keys to a free and equal society. It is my sincere hope that the dream quickly turns to reality.

On behalf of the Muslim Coalition of Connecticut, thanks again to the Judicial Branch for this incredible honor. We hope and we pray that we can help transform the lives of all people for the better. God bless America.