



Assalamu Alaykum

Dear Students,

I hope this letter reaches you with the best of health and Iman. Just sending a reflection.

One of the biggest, most unresolvable crises of American life is the crisis of Race. The recent events from St. Louis illustrate this point, that Race is not only the impossible conversation, but it also seems to be the unresolvable conversation. There are other difficult conversations: the Middle East, Gender, Sexuality, for example. Race, like all of these, is a very real issue. We must understand it well. On a side note, we must address it properly so that we do not point fingers wrongly at people. Meaning, we must avoid pointing fingers at someone (in this case White) for something he did not do. But, because you are American, you inherit this conversation.


It is also fitting that I am writing this note while completing Thanksgiving, which I will address below.

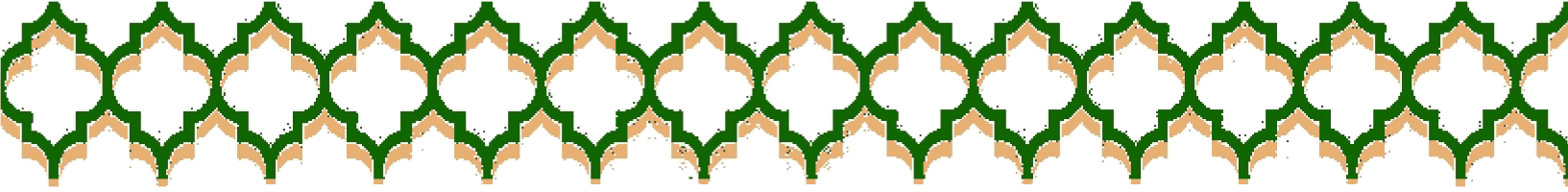
We must be clear to distinguish between Racism, Bigotry, and Discrimination. The latter two can be from anyone against almost anyone. Meaning, it is possible for a Black American to be bigoted and to discriminate against someone White. Racism, in contrast, has a national power-dynamic and institutionalization built into it. It might be difficult to understand: a Black American cannot, by definition, be racist.

In the conversation on Race, we must speak of power, privilege, identity, and make sure we understand these matters properly. For example, it is not that white people are in power, as much as Whiteness dominates. I find it curious that when I'm with a group of students aged 13 or under, and I ask them to describe the first person who comes to mind as an American, they mention someone with blonde hair and blue eyes. Keep in mind that they are 13 or under. Meaning, for almost the entirety of their conscious lives, the President has been Obama, yet when they think of a common "American," they think of someone Scandinavian.

I find it even more curious that those same students, mentioned above, do not -- by default -- think of themselves as "American." It is common for Muslims, born and raised here, to consider themselves outsiders, as though the default race/ethnicity/religion of America is White Christianity. While Christianity was definitely central to the lives of the vast majority of Americans for the entire history of this nation, this is officially a secular nation. The default religion of America is secularism; the constitution and American public space are consciously agnostic. Stores are bombarding us with Christmas music and reindeer right now not because they are Christian, but because there is a market for it.

Let us also be clear about which Christianity is the perceived default: Protestant. As Muslims, we tend to think of Christians all as one group with one theology. Catholics have had a presence on these soils in various pockets for centuries, but when Catholics started migrating to the US in masses, they were rejected in ways akin to what you and I face right now as Muslims. In many cases -- because they did not have the privilege of instantaneous mass media -- they were treated worse. The point is that Catholics were "outsiders" as much as you and I are now, and now majority of the Supreme Court Justices are Catholic.





Further, if you live in Chicagoland, then the vast majority of “White” people you meet will have ancestry that traces back at most 4-5 generations. Within the city of Chicago itself, the White people you meet will more than likely trace themselves back to 2-3 generations. Arabs and South Asians have now had an established presence in Chicago of 3 generations, and in some places like Detroit, 4-5 generations.

So, in reality, you are not an outsider here, any more than your neighbor is.

But, things are different when we speak to Black Americans. The only populations more indigenous than Black Americans are the First Nation/Native Americans. You will rarely meet anyone in America who has a lineage here that traces back further than a Black American. Of course, you will not meet anyone who has lineage that traces back further than a Native American’s. Remember that Thanksgiving is on the one hand, the holiest holiday in America. More stores are shut on Thanksgiving than on Christmas, until the insane “Black Friday” shopping begins. But, Thanksgiving, for a Native American is a reminder of theft and genocide, as much as or more than Columbus Day.


Because of the way Power imposes itself, it grants privilege in a few ways: institution, culture, and thought. I’m old enough to remember Chicago before the election of Mayor Harold Washington in the 1980s. With his election, the possibilities for a person of color to get a government job increased tremendously. Prior to this, there were persons of color in occasional high positions, and they were usually immigrants. After his election, it became much more common to see Black Americans in all levels of employment in the government.

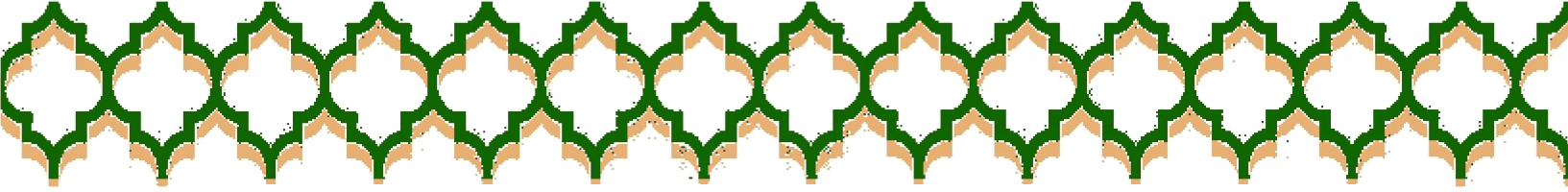
But, regarding prosecution and sentencing, the statistics seem to indicate that we have a really long way to go. Statistically, a Black American male will receive harsher sentencing than a White male counterpart convicted of the same crime.

Further, in culture, we do find cultures across the globe privileging light skin; we internalize White Supremacy in our own self-images. I find it troubling how common it is for young women and men to feel something inferior about themselves because of the perceived darkness of their skin. It is also absurd that (a) the biggest movie star in the world (from Bollywood) is a spokesman for “Fair and Handsome” skin lightening cream, and (b) the Bollywood actress regarded as the most beautiful woman in the world is, in real life, my skin color, but on screen, after she has apparently lathered up on the lotion, she is almost milky white. And, I’m not talking about chocolate milk.

But, what about Muslims in America?

In 1964, Black Americans constituted almost the entirety of Islam in America. There were Arabs in Detroit, primarily from Lebanon. There were small pockets Moroccans all over the country. There were also pockets of Chinese Muslims across the West Coast. But, the vast majority of Muslims were Black American. By 1990, about a third of the Muslims of America were Black American, with a third Arab, and a third South Asian. Now, Black Americans constitute about 20% of Muslims in America, with most of the other 80% split still between Arabs and South Asians. Of course, there are rapidly rising populations of Latino Muslims and other converts.





There are also rapidly rising populations of East African, North African, and Iraqi refugees, whose children frequently get embraced by local Churches.

But, something else changed. Up through 1964, Islam in America was a spiritually driven civil rights movement. Since then, it has shifted to an Identity movement, where Muslims became much more conscious of their image in society, and the preservation of back home cultures, than in Spirituality and Social Justice. It is fair to say that even though we do not judge anyone's intentions, most of the Islamic centers established in the past few decades were focused on cultural identity-preservation. Meaning, parents did not want their children to "become American." So, it follows that the children of those centers do not regard themselves as American, as ridiculous as that may be.

It was in 1964 that Malcolm X wrote his letter from Makkah (Mecca), amazed that he was finding Muslims of every skin color and eye color, all united in pilgrimage. But, today, I am repulsed by how often I hear the most horrendous, racist language among Muslims, young and old. I am disgusted by how many liquor stores across the most poor regions of Chicago are run by people with Muslim names. It used to be that most of these Muslim-run liquor stores were run by Palestinians and Jordanians; since then, however, quite a few others -- including Muslims from South Asia -- have opened up such shops. Because it is a local problem, it feels more shameful than knowing that killers overseas claim my religion as they wreak havoc.

Again, this is the legacy you are inheriting. It is up to you to decide which side of the line of justice we stand on. It is up to you to decide whether or not to embrace your responsibilities in this society as an American. The other option is that we look down on ourselves or others because of things as shallow as skin color.

And God knows best.

May Allah bless you.

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