

# From Protest to Engagement

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[Opening du'a]



Al-salām ‘alaykum

I’m very happy to be with you here today to speak at this conference about our responsibility, asking ourselves what we can do from protesting to being engaged in our society.

We don’t have much time and you are listening to so many beautiful talks. The one we heard just now from Ali Juma’a is really essential.

You know I just spent the last months with the Prophet ‘alayhi Al-Salām, writing about him and really what he said and the Ahādīth that are really giving us the Ahkām to the Sirah of the Prophet (saw), really. Where ‘A’isha radī Allahu ‘anhā was asked about the Prophet (saw) she was saying ‘kāna khulquhu Al-Qur’ān’ – he was the Qur’an in the way he was dealing with the people, in the way he was dealing with Allah subhāna wa ta’āla. So it’s really essential for us to come to this on the understanding of which way we can be rooted in the Islamic tradition. And at the end of the day, it’s really a love story between our hearts and the Prophet (saw). It’s important not only to study the facts, but to study the meaning of every single situation in which he was dealing with Allah, in which way he was dealing with his fellow Muslims, with the Companions; in which way he was dealing with every single situation.

We can draw from every situation teachings, which are really necessary for our time. So it’s a point for us to ask ourselves when it comes to this, in which way he was engaged in his society, not only did he receive relations but it changed his society and the world. His heart had changed the hearts of the people around him. He changed the society and he spread around him what he was saying in Medina when he first arrived – Ifshū Al-Salām – meaning, ‘spread peace around you’. At’imū Al-Ta’ām – give food to the poor, Sallū Al-Nās Al-Niyām – which is the centrality of the Islāmīc spirituality – when all the people are sleeping – wake up, wake up to his call and wake up to the meaning of your life. Then saying ‘tadhkhal Al-Jannata bil Salām – at the end you will go to this paradise that you are seeking with peace.

And this is all what we are trying to do at the end – our engagement in our society.

You know I changed something that was essential. For twenty years I have been working within the Muslim Communities dealing with books, with scholars, with ‘ulamā’ and I was reading and reading and my field was Usūl Al-Fiqh. I was within this obsession that what is essential for us is to please Allah subhāna wa ta’āla and to promote justice.

And at the end, through the Prophet’s life (saw) what became essential for me was that he was asking us to promote peace. Peace with all the conditions of peace. Inner peace – come back to something that is essential – in your heart. And in your heart there is a question which is exactly what we have in the Qur’ān: fītarat Allah allati fatara Al-Nās ‘alayhā. This natural aspiration towards Allah subhāna wa ta’āla and this question which is everywhere.

And in fact, we should know something - when you call people to the way of Allah subhāna wa ta’āla – you are not calling – you are re-calling – come back to the question which is question which is ‘why?’ To call is to re-call.

*Ya ayuhā Al-Lathīna āminū istajībū lilahi wa lilrasūl ithā da’ākum li mā yuhyīkum wa*

*‘alimū an Allahi beyna Al-Mar’i wa Al-Qalb*

Oh you who have this imān, come and respond to the call of Allah subhāna wa ta’āla and the Prophet when they both call you to what gives you life and know that the knowledge of Allah is between yourself and your heart.

So this is the first engagement with our own self and it’s essential to understand this meaning. It’s essential. And who gives us this teaching out of his life, out of what he was achieving (saw), telling us the first condition of inner peace is to answer the question, ‘why?’. Why are you here? Why all this? Why come to all these lectures just to have one hour of peace or to try to get out of this peace, a life of peace? Between your prayers to get that peace which is essential for us and then there is something which we know is essential to get that peace – no peace without education. There is no peace without tarbiyyah. And this is why when Allah subhāna wa ta’āla first spoke to the Prophet (saw) He said,

### *Iqrā' b'ismi rabbuka [Surat Al-'Alaq]*

And *rabbuka* is not only Allah far from you – it is your Educator. He is educating you. You have no father, you lost your mother, but Allah *subhāna wa ta'āla* (swt) is your Educator. So come to this spiritual education which is essential for us.

The third condition is Justice. This is why with the Qur'an we hear this prayer, which is,

### *Allahumma dthalamnā anfusunā*

Al-Dthulm is to be unjust in your own self and then to be unjust with the people. Allah (swt) commands justice – no peace without justice – no justice, no peace. So this is something which is essential for us which is the third condition of peace.

And then there is the fourth condition which is essential for all of us, which is consistency. Consistency is essential.

### *Al-Lathīna 'amilū Al-Salihāt*

Try to do what you say and say as much as you can do and try your best. Avoid hypocrisy and come to consistency. Without consistency, there is no peace. So we are engaged towards a way of peace.

### *'ifshū Al-Salām'*

Come back to Allah (swt), come back to your own self, your own heart, and spread this peace around you. This is something which is essential.

All these conditions are essential with one thing – the second name of Allah (swt) and according to some scholars is also the first name at the same level – Al-Rahmān. To forgive. Because if you are not forgiving, if you don't know how to forgive your own self, go back to Allah, and ask him for *tawbā'* – which means if you are sincere He knows your sincerity and He will remove everything.

And so many times the Prophet (saw) is referring to Al-Juma'a and to the Al-Hajj – to all what we can do to remove the bad things you have done. To remove the mistakes to remove the weaknesses – just to come back to this. Forgiveness is essential towards you and towards the other. Just look for your brothers and sisters – 'seventy excuses'. If you don't find one,

just imagine there is one you don't know. This is the Message of Islam. This is the main thing we have to come to.

By the way, when it comes to being engaged in our society, the starting point is this one. This is where we are strong. This is our spiritual identity, beyond anything else. Our spiritual identity is this one. This is from where we get that strength and this is why we have in the Qur'ān,

*A'lam tara kayfa darab Allah methalan kalimatan teyyibatan k'shajartin teyyibatin, asūlhā*

*thābit*

The roots are rooted in the Earth, you are from them. And what are these roots? Al-Imān. And the Earth – what is the symbol of the Earth – your heart. So the strength you have is coming from here [Professor Ramadan points to his heart].

You can have rain, wind – you can have weather coming from outside, but if the roots are strong you will be strong. This is Al-Kalimah Al-Teyyibah which is as the Al-Shajarah Al-Teyyibah. When you come to qabitha – the bad or the weak word – the weak involvement to our faith – it's as if you are out rooted from the Earth; anything from outside is just driving you left or right. There is no stability – there is no balance identity and no spiritual identity as you are trying to say, as you are trying to do, and trying to achieve as Muslims.

So when it comes to this, I was asking myself coming to this conference, 'from protest to engagement' – and I only had one concern about the title – to protest is to be engaged. Sometimes you have to say no. The Prophet (saw) said no – sometimes you have to say 'what you are doing is against my name, is against my principles.' So sometimes, to protest is to be engaged. It's not enough, but it could be the beginning of a general public awareness. It happened in this country. When 20,000 people were saying to the outside, 'the war on Iraq is a mistake' – it's a protest. We don't agree with this, we're not engaging with that. So it's an engagement. Its words to be heard and words to be said – and you have to be part of the whole process in a democratic society.

Having said that, engagement means acting against the victim mentality. Yes there are Muslims today facing security measures, facing injustices, facing discrimination and racism, that's for sure. We have two choices – sit down here and say 'the British Society doesn't like Muslims and Islām' or stand up and say 'we are British citizens, we are Muslims, we are Muslim British citizens and we are British Muslim citizens. We have rights and duties. We will stand for our rights, and we will offer what we know as our responsibility. We are not only integrated – this discussion about integration is over; now it's time for us to contribute. We want to give something to this society. It's very important not to have this victim

mentality which is self-nurturing. When you speak about it you have it in mind. It's become a psychological obsession. We know that by repeating something, it becomes part of your mindset. And this is what I call, by way of example, the custom officer syndrome.

You know, it happened to me. You're driving towards the boarder, and you think to yourself 'I am sure, that with my face, he is going to stop me. I am sure.' You know, with this face – no quite British or Swiss – a bit coming from there. And as you get closer to him, you can see on his face a sense of something tense. He's going to stop me. And he's looking at you and he stops you. You see – you have a self-fulfilling prophecy, because it's in you. You sent it to him, and what happened is he says 'ok, come here' and you say 'I knew it. I knew he was going to do that.' If you were in his place, you would have arrested yourself.

[Audience applaud and laugh]

Isn't it the case? This is what we call the custom officer syndrome.

We have it in our community. We are nurturing this sense that something is wrong in them and we have it in us. You know, *la ilaha illā lā* is a word of liberation. It's to free yourself. It's the roots – where you have the branches in the sky. Freedom.

So we have to come through this and say 'engagement out of self respect and freedom'.

The second point here is that when we go beyond this, it's 'in which way can we contribute'. And what are the conditions of this contribution. Let me just say three points on this – and this is coming from the Prophet's life (saw). He taught us not just to contribute – you know it's very strange and paradoxical – he comes with a Message and is sitting down and listening to people. He was coming with something to say, and he was listening. And you are here with the message 'listen to the British society, listen to YOUR society.' You are at home here, and when you are at home, you have to listen to the people – what do they want, what are their questions, what are the fears? Why is it so, that today you have people speaking about Islam saying 'wow – there is a problem' – and we don't know how to deal with it because we confuse the question – we confuse the level. We speak to the public forgetting the government, and we speak to the government forgetting the citizens. We are alienating ourselves out of confusion. And the first thing at the heart of the Message is – clarity, priority, a vision.

So the first condition that we need, living in our society here, which is essential – is confidence. You heard that he was coming here and almost crying telling us,

*Wa mā arsalnāka illā rahmatan lil ‘ālimīn*

You are a mercy, what more than that could you want.

But this message is not just for you – it’s beyond you – it’s beyond your heart – it’s for all the people. So it’s something which is a powerful thing. You know even the people who don’t know Arabic, they sit here and they listen to the Qur’an and they feel there is something here. There is something in this book. Because it’s beyond us. It’s coming from Rub Al-‘Ālamīn. This should give us the confidence to engage in our society. And we also need a sense of belonging.

You know, I come to this Muslim gathering and we are all together, I can feel that there is powerful spirituality here – and that’s good. And we all say, you are Muslims and you are British citizens. But the point is not to feel it here – it’s to have this sense of belonging outside. Think about this country – it’s your home. And if it’s not your home – think about your kids. Think about your daughters and your sons. They are going to live here. So what you want to do is change this society for the better, and not hope that this society is going to collapse, because if it is collapsing, your sons and daughters are going to be part of the whole process. Remember that you are here to change – and rahmah indicates that you are changing it for the better.

We need to know in which way we can contribute and add to the sense of belonging quickly.

As I said, how can we build the sense of confidence? Shaykh Ali Juma’a said something essential – knowledge. Come back to this knowledge. Not every one of us is asked to be an ‘ālim, but we are all asked to seek knowledge. The important thing to ask yourself is ‘what am I going to know more tomorrow, than I do today.’

What is important here is the prayer of the Prophet,

*Allahumma nas’aluka ‘alman nāfi’a*

We ask you for useful knowledge that is going to change us.

So here we come to something that is really essential to us coming to the spiritual meaning of our dīn. So we can add to this the knowledge of our teaching and our spiritual identity. Something in our spirituality that is very essential as well is Tawhīd, then the values that we are all trying to get, reach, and implement. This is as I said, to be just on our own selves, to

educate our own self. You know I'm very scared that all the business of coming to lectures is becoming a fashion – we come to sit from one hour to another – to listen as though to say 'ok we are listening'. This is consumerism, it's not education. Education is to sit with the book of Allah (swt) every day. Education means to change yourself; education is to follow in the footsteps of the Prophet (saw) and to look at how he dealt with things, and then to ask yourself 'am I dealing with it in the same way. Am I with my children, as he was?' You've heard the stories and sometimes we sit and cry for one hour and we forget for two weeks. So the point is to come to this understanding of our religion, of the Shari'a.

The Shari'a is not a closed universe of laws – it's a way towards faithfulness. I'm very happy to have here Shaykh Rashad Ghanooshi, who has written so many books trying to teach this community to come back to the fundamentals. It's incredible to have in this room to have all these scholars coming from all over the world with all this knowledge, and we have to take it and go back home and say to ourselves 'ok, how am I going to change my life?'. You know, the people who are speaking are not stars – they are educators. And you know the difference between the stars and the educators? The stars think that the audience serve him, but the educators think they serve the audience.

[Audience applaud]

We are not here to be served. If there is an 'ālim to be served, then he is not an 'ālim – there is something of the jahiliyyah in it. All the people who are here are here to serve the community, in shā' Allah.

We have to give something to our society and be engaged. As I said, it's the sense of belonging, so that this is home.

And as Muslims we need to look again at our spiritual education. Islāmic education is a very strong message with universal principles – and what does this mean? A universal message means the principles are not going to change – they are trans-historical. We are respecting mutual principles. But these universal principles are not teaching us that everything must be a reality of uniformity – that we are not going to deal with diversity. No, it's the same principles but for many cultures. Islam is universal and takes form all cultures. I will repeat again, the Arabic language is the language of Islam, but the Arab cultures are not the cultures of Islam.

[Audience applaud]

When I start speaking about Muslims from Pakistan, they become very happy. They say 'ah yes, this is it.' [Audience laugh] There is a very old fight between the Pakistani culture and the Arab culture, because they were treated like this. And I'm asking both, the Arabs and the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshi and the Turkish, to think exactly the same about the British, the European cultures, because not everything in the European cultures is bad. There are many good things that we have to take.

So the point is to engage. First we integrate into this society and start contributing. Integration means to know what is good, and to know the weaknesses. We have to be selective to what are the questions, because there are questions. The Muslim Community is going through what I call an identity crisis. But we are amidst societies that are going through exactly the same process – ‘who are we, what are we going to do, what are we going to be?’ these are the questions that are essential here.

So where is our contribution?

And how do we have to promote this contribution? Here we have another syndrome – not the custom officer syndrome- but the Zidan syndrome. You know Zidan. Zidan is a French player. You know him, because the British would love to have him in their team! [Audience laugh]. Even if he’s Algerian in origin, come! Forget about your French citizenship. Zidan gave so much, so much to the French team. He was a leader – he was giving, he was giving out of his character, he was giving as a player – no one asked him at the end of any one match – ‘where do you come from?’ When you give, your origin is forgotten, because you give. But when you are perceived as a problem, at the end of the sentence people say ‘where do you come from?’ [Audience laugh] No, think about it. It’s a psychological phenomenon; when you give, the people say ‘wow’ and they take. But when you are perceived as only complaining, only protesting, only saying we are victims, people say ‘wow, where do they come from?’ And by the way, what is Britishness? Because they feel you are not part. But they never said that to Zidan. Because at the end of the day, the Zidan syndrome is the embodiment of the Islamic teaching – wherever you are, you give.

You know something, my father, just before passing away, met you a few years ago when he said that from the starting point of when he became a Muslim, Islām was to give and give and give [audience applaud]. Rahīmuhu Allah. I will never forget that and until the end of my life, my respect is to these words, because he was just telling me to ‘give’. Give, just as he has been given. Give and be a gift, and you know in our time, what it means to be gift? It’s to be a question.

All the people around you are forgetting the meaning of life. What they should see out of you is rahmah.

What is the meaning of this forgetfulness in Arabic? It’s Al-Ghafla.

*Wa hum ‘an Al-Ākhira ghāfilūn*

They are forgetting about life, the hereafter, in ghafla. What is your gift? Just to ask a

question. When people look at you they will say ‘why is she/he acting like this? Why? Why is he serving and why is he smiling?’

### *Al-Ibtisām fī wajhi akhūk sadaqa*

Why are you smiling? Because it’s a gift. So you are a question mark in the daily life of the people, so be a question.

In your daily life, just be a question. I remember an American intellectual who was from a minority saying ‘you know what, I don’t want to just be respected by you, and tolerated by you, I want to bother you.’ No, look, ‘to bother you’ is to set you a question ‘who am I?’ with this it’s really important, so be a question.

Secondly, and importantly, he or she who wants to serve Allah should serve the people. The best among us is the best for the people; for the Muslims and for the people. Serve them out of emotion, friendship, forgiveness, help – serve them. Through your knowledge, serve them in their society. This is your engagement this is practical engagement – serve the people.

So be confident with your religion and serve them. But to serve them means you cannot be isolated from them. If you serve them far from the society, it’s not going to be visible. You should have a positive, visible presence.

You know, very often Muslims say ‘Islām is a very simple religion,’ and that is true, but life is complicated. It’s very complicated. Don’t make religion more complicated than life is.

### *Yasilū wa la ta’asirū*

Make it easy for the people, make it easy.

### *Basshir*

Tell the people to come, tell them it is there that they will find light. When you all want peace, this is what you want.

My conclusion is also something that is really important.

To get the peace I was talking about before, you have to be consistent. So it's pushing you towards self education. You want to serve, you know you have to be patient, you come back to Allah (swt) and you ask for more patience. You know it's a virtuous process. You have a vicious circle but a virtuous process. This is the way you are with Allah and following the Prophet (saw) through all the stories of the Prophet trying to help the people nurture themselves, to better themselves, to improve their own spiritual education. But there is something which is essential as well.

I mentioned before, listen to the questions of the people around you and you will see that they are asking for food for their hearts. They don't want superficial emotions they want deep, deep, deep answers. Only the people who are happy with superficial answers are happy with it, but deep down you can see that there is something that is a deep question.

But we also have to contribute at the spiritual level, and I want to end on this.

We need to have a critical contribution. We live in societies where there is freedom, where there are rights. But we have to be involved in all the levels as citizens. But our critical contribution is also to ask ourselves, where our societies are leading, or heading. When you see all these new laws and politics, putting us under political pressures, we need to ask ourselves, yes we want democracies, but we need to be critical towards the type of democracies we have now. And this isn't a Muslim issue by the way, it's an issue of justice, so it's a British issue. You have to be critical of all your fellow citizens, to be able to have something that is a critical contribution to what our democracies are.

What about freedom of expression?

So by being critical, please, stop always being involved with foreign policies. We need British Muslims to deal with domestic issues in this country [audience applaud], we need Muslims to be involved in education, the education in this country is a problem – there is a crisis. I didn't realise it before coming here. It's just incredible. Where are the Muslims? Where are the Muslims when it comes to unemployment, when it comes to the job market, when it comes to racism? Domestic issues – you have to be part of the whole thing. Not just 'we speak about Islām, we speak about Muslims.' It's a universal Message – it's not only for you. The Qur'ān was sent to the Prophet (saw) saying 'look at this'. When the Muslims were trying to put the blame on a Jew the Qur'ān was revealed to the Prophet (saw) to show the Muslim is the guilty man and the Jew is innocent. Telling us at the same time that justice is a universal business, it's not to be just with the Muslim and unjust with them. This is not acceptable, this is not us, and this is not our religion. This is a narrow-minded attitude – it's not us.

So the point is critical contribution. At the same time as being involved critically at the

domestic level, you also need to be the voice for the voiceless. You also need to hear, in this country, the people saying that you are British citizens; you demonstrated in the streets of this country and you are still not happy with what is done in your name, because it's in your name you have to say to the Government, 'look, stop. Stop in Iraq. Show some mercy and some concern towards some Palestinians, towards Tibetans, show some mercy towards oppressed people.

You are these voices. You are not here to be far from your society. I'm sorry, but the spiritual dimension cannot be without the other voice which is a concern for the oppressed. What are you going to say on the day of judgement? That you didn't know? That things are done in your name against the people who are oppressed – I'm sorry, but you have to have a voice. It's a critical voice. It's not to cry, it's not to insult, it's to be critically involved as citizens, asking to be involved as citizens, placing your vote, making your voice heard, and speaking for the name of the people.

You know, we condemn the killing of innocent people, where are you to condemn the silence of the International Community? Their silence should be condemned – it's not acceptable. The Prophet (saw) was so nice, so sweet but at the same time, he stood up to an injustice, saying 'no, never.'

Never.

So let us be critically involved in the process, full of mercy and aware of the challenges; critically involved at the intellectual level and the spiritual level. This is what we should try to be, and should try to promote in our life.

The last word I wanted to end with.

In some of the airports in this country, some of the aeroplanes took your brothers and sisters and some people, and sent them to countries where they were tortured. They were tortured. And as Muslims we know torture is not accepted in any way. Never. So you know, when you say no to that you are not only standing for Allah, you are standing for all the British people, and telling them 'not in your name. It's not dignified. It's not right. It cannot be accepted.' So when you are standing up for all people, not just the oppressed Muslims, the people are going to respect you – you know why? Because you respect yourself – and why do you respect yourself? Because you want to be loved by Allah (swt).

There is no way, but this way. To stand up. And this, this is engagement. This is the way the people are going to say 'yes, these Muslims are a question for my mind, and despite all the fears, I want to know them better.' Meaning by that, getting to know our religion better, and meaning by that, coming back to the universality of our Message.

May in shā' Allah, Allah help us to be faithful to our Message, to get this useful knowledge.  
Wa Allahu 'alam wa 'alā wa Al-Salām 'alaykum wa rahmat Allah.

[Audience applaud and cheer]