INTRODUCTORY REMARKS GIVEN AT THE DUKE FORUM FOR LAW & SOCIAL CHANGE SYMPOSIUM *THE NEW FACE OF DISCRIMINATION: "MUSLIM" IN AMERICA*

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Good morning. I greet you with the universal Muslim greeting, "salaam alaikum." I think one of the practical results of this conference should be teaching more people this universal Muslim greeting. In response you say, "walaaikum salaam." This is a wonderful icebreaker for Muslim colleagues, friends, and neighbors and will take you a few steps ahead in the conversation. It's a wonderful greeting, but these days don't try it at airports. I don't know whether to laugh or cry at that joke, unfortunately. Laughter and tears are both appropriate when a salutation as innocent as "peace be upon you" could be a source of tension and anxiety in an American airport. This greeting could earn you additional care and attention from airport security, which I often receive. Just two months ago, when I was about to board my flight, I was throwing around these Arabic words, "Inshallah, Mashallah, and Alahmdulillah." The next thing I know I was about to miss my flight because I had been detained by a nice gentleman who knew almost nothing about Islam and who thought those phrases posed some sort of threat.

I really admire the people who organized this event, which is prophetic and timely. I'm an Imam so I can get away with calling things prophetic. I really appreciate the Forum for drawing attention to what I will call Islamophobia, an unfounded and baseless fear of Islam and Muslims. Lately, anything linked to Islam seems to bring fear and anxiety to people's hearts. I consider Islamophobia to be a societal disease and a new challenge that American society must address. The title of this symposium, The New Face of Discrimination, really captures the essence of this dilemma. Islamophobia is still poorly defined and is not yet part of the collective consciousness of American society but is similar to older social problems.

Although it is the most recent face of discrimination, Islamophobia is nothing new. Islamophobia is very similar to anti-Semitism, homophobia, and racism, with which this society has dealt in the past. To view discrimination against Muslims as a unique issue pertaining only to Muslims would ignore the lessons of history. We must discuss Islamophobia as a human problem that has shown itself in different forms and shapes in other times and in different communities. Unfortunately, we human beings often seek a common enemy.

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And creating a common enemy is not without its benefits. Defaming and dehumanizing certain groups of people is often the best way to seize or hold power. It justifies certain foreign, domestic, and economic policies and unifies disharmonious factions.

Even though it should be understood as a persistent human problem, Islamophobia has become a growing concern since 9/11. One would think that since 9/11, fear of Islam would have decreased. Books have been sold and conferences have been held to encourage a better understanding of Islam. I just came from the Duke Hospital where I was conducting a training session to raise awareness about Islam. But as someone who is working on the grassroots level, who is working with people individually and collectively, I can tell you that things are getting a lot worse. I really hope that we can conquer Islamophobia more effectively than the previous challenges of anti-Semitism, homophobia, and racism. Unfortunately we could not overcome those challenges until things got really ugly, and I hope and pray that this will not be the case in our fight against Islamophobia.

Why are things getting worse this long after 9/11? After the attacks, people were upset, people were confused, and they were questioning the nature of Islam. But why is Islamophobia still a problem nine years later? It is well-known among propagandists that a message doesn't have to be true, it doesn't have to be backed by scientific information, and it doesn't have to be accurate as long as you repeat it often enough. Once you repeat something so many times, even the most educated, most enlightened, most progressive, most peaceful people will begin to buy the message. So since 9/11, Islam has been decried as evil and a religion of terrorists. Muslims have been branded as primitive, vengeful, and angry people who oppress women, who are anti-gay, and who possess values that are irreconcilable with the Western Judeo-Christian civilization. This message has been repeated so many times that it is no longer just an idea or an unfounded claim. It has started sinking into the hearts and minds of many people as a reality. God forbid something like 9/11 should happen again, but if it does, it is terrifying to imagine what the permeation of this message will inspire. As the previous human challenges of anti-Semitism, homophobia, and racism reveal, fear of a culture, a religion, or a people can cause the deaths of millions and leave a deep scar on humanity. But we are not bound by our history. I like to tell a common Turkish redneck joke: a Turkish redneck sees a banana peel on his walkway, a huge, slippery banana peel, and instead of picking it up, he says, "shoot, I am going to fall again." My invitation to all of you is let's not fall again. We see the banana peel in our way, but we must not fall again. Let's learn from our previous mistakes before it gets really ugly.

You cannot imagine how painful it is to be a Muslim chaplain on this campus and see seventeen and eighteen year old kids who have achieved the American dream, but feel rejected by their country. The parents of these students came to this country as poor graduate students. Now many of them live in million dollar homes in the suburbs and can pay full tuition to send their daughter and son to Duke University. These kids have high SAT scores, sterling academic credentials and succeed at almost anything they try. And yet, they still do not feel the pride that they deserve to feel. Not because of what they have done, but because of who they are. It is painful to counsel young Duke students

through the process of changing their names from Muhammad, Abdullah, Hassan or Hussein, to Jonathan or Harry, from Fatimah or Aisha to Caroline. They do this not because they dislike like their original names, but because an irresponsible media has attached such negative baggage to the names their parents gave them. They tell me they do not want to go through this "crap" anymore. It is painful. It is really painful to be the father of an eight year old girl who comes home at least two or three times a week and asks me "Baba, are you sure it's okay to be Muslim? That it's a cool thing to be a Muslim? Are you sure it's a fun thing to be a Muslim?"

I don't know what to say to my daughter. The feeling in the air about Islam and Muslims is dark and negative. This is the new face of a persistent human problem that has shown up before as racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. We have a responsibility to face this challenge and avoid the mistakes of the past. I admire you for bringing this group together. Hopefully many good things will come out of this to counter Islamophobia, the new challenge to our society.