

# Remarks given by Dr. Alaa Murabit on July 17, 2020 at the Religious Freedom Annual Review hosted by the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at the BYU Law School

Hi, I am so honored to be speaking with you all today. And I wish I could have been there in person. Obviously, circumstances mean that we're going to have this conversation virtually, but that doesn't mean it has to be any less impactful. Now, for those of you who don't know me very well, I'm Alaa Murabit, I'm a UN High Level Commissioner. I'm an SDG advocate. I'm a very new mom, which means I'm getting a lot less sleep than I would like. But, above and beyond everything else, I am a person of faith. I fundamentally view the world with a lens that accounts for mercy and love and compassion, and I view power in that lens as well. And so, when I was asked to come and speak about what religious freedom means, to me, I thought it was incredibly important for me to preface this with some context from my own life and my own upbringing, but also what I think we could potentially be doing better to ensure that religious freedom is, you know, is held for everyone. It's not just for the select around the world.

So, I'm going to rewind and take us back to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. That's where I was born in 1989. In fact, I was actually born at home and my mom uses it as evidence of my perpetual impatience. But ever since I was a kid, my dad, who was a general surgeon, would come home with these incredible stories about his patients, about what he was able to do, about how incredible they were and what they were able to overcome. And his level of awe was always kind of centered in this belief that there was a higher power, right, that—even some people call it the universe, some call it God, whatever it might be to you, but that this higher power, kept everything in this divine balance.

And as I got older, that became so much more important in the way I looked at the world. But it also was cemented even more by the fact that my kind of after school program, if you will, was going to the hospital. It was, you know, watching surgeries, it was walking the halls of the hospital and getting to see the different nurses and doctors doing this incredible work. And I think in the past several months, we've all woken up to just how incredible that work is. But, but when you're, you know, a six-, seven-, ten-, thirteen-year-old kid, it's, it's you know, universe opening. It ensures that all you want to do in life is to be that beneficial to others. And, you know, there were very few places in the hospital where I could go without my dad and without a security badge. One of them was the library, which meant I did a lot of studying there and learning there. And the other was actually the prayer room.

And I would argue that, you know, the prayer room, the walls of a hospital have heard more prayers than any congregation, any mosque, any church, any synagogue. They have heard prayers, you know, from believers from people who don't even think God exists. They have heard prayers from people who are desperate from people who are thankful. They have seen, I think, the most intimate part of our humanity. And there was something so incredibly powerful about being in that room with all these different people, from every different religion, who all found that moment of peace together in that same space. And I think for me, that's really where my appreciation for faith actually started. It was

recognizing that it can be such a powerful motivator for mercy and for good and for compassion. And that it cemented a lot of what my dad did in the world, but that it also cemented a lot of the ways in which people overcame the biggest obstacles and challenges.

Now, as I got older, you know, and I think, you know, some poignant moments in life really strike you, but the world was kind of reintroduced to Islam in different ways. And one of those ways was it was definitely through the media, it was through the actions of a select extreme few. And that reintroduction meant that I had to publicly wrestle with what faith meant, and what religious freedom meant. It meant that I had to always find ways to, you know, give value to my faith to people who may not understand it, it meant I had to debate it. And so the part of me that was, you know, also the middle of eleven children—so also always very excited to win an argument and open to any debate—began to take it on wholeheartedly. You know, how can I explain this to somebody who deliberately does not want to understand me? Now, as I've gotten older, I've realized I just don't have the patience to try anymore, but back then it really became a personal mission. And so, I started doing a lot more research about my faith. A lot of people would come and ask me questions like, well, how can you call yourself a feminist and Muslim. And it became very easy for me to go do the research, bring it back and say, you know what the very, very base facts, you know, of the Quran, which is our holy book, was held in the care of Hafsa, a woman. Most of the sayings of the Prophet that have been transmitted through history were set by a woman, Aisha. The first, the mother of the believers, Khadija bint Khuwaylid, who was a businesswoman and was twenty years older than the prophet who actually financed the entire Islamic movement in religion when it was sanctioned and excluded.

And so, I have these incredible examples—Nusayba—who fought on the front lines with the Prophet. And they juxtaposed a very foundational reality, I think, in every faith, especially, you know—and I can speak only about mine—but I would say, especially near kind of major Abrahamic faiths, where, where the day-to-day reality wasn't always the same. Where you know, I could not always identify with those historical champions in everyday life, right, where oftentimes, our scripture and our text is taken, and it's manipulated, and it's misused, and it's reinterpreted for the benefit of a select few because of their own political or economic or social gain. And unfortunately, in most of our faiths, that often means to the detriment of women. And so, when I was 21, really, I founded an organization called the Voice of Libyan Women and my mission went beyond now just trying to understand faith for myself, but also trying to reconcile organized religion with the part of me that fundamentally believes everyone is equal, because oftentimes those two things are excluded, right? Or exclusive. Organized religion is, at its very base, a way to organize, maintain and hold power. And equality oftentimes is a way to give power to others and to realize that you're, you know, that you guys share that power. And so those two things can be mutually exclusive. And it was a question of, you know, do we need to reconcile this? How can we, how can we support this?

And I mention this because that's, I think, where religious freedom becomes the most critical. Religious freedom becomes the most critical when we are exploring the fundamental, you know, gaps in our faith communities, in our religious communities, but also when we're challenging them with our own faith and with collective faith. To say that, you know, the way you're interpreting this might not be correct, or the way this is being applied to a select subset of our community is not fair. It's not reflected in the history of our faith. It's not reflected in the traditions; it's not reflected in the laws or the legitimacy. And I think that that freedom to recognize that organized religion and that a lot of actions we see today, a lot of the rhetoric you know, from anywhere in the world—from the United States, where religion is used to hold women's reproductive rights back, in many parts, to other parts of the world

where religion is used to, to promote female genital mutilation in the Gambia, or it's used to forbid girls from going to school or, you know, it's used, at the very base, to not have daughters in the first place, right? When we look at kind of that relationship between women's rights and freedom of religion, I think that's when it becomes the most important. And it's particularly important for women who have that freedom of faith, that freedom of thought, to say: we're going to analyze this, we're going to lead this we're going to communicate this differently, we're going to interpret this differently, and we're going to hold power in this space that traditionally and historically has omitted us intentionally because of the fact that we are powerful. And so, when I was 21, and I founded the Voice of Libyan Women, that became the priority—how do we create space for women in bodies of faith? And it was actually leveraging faith that allowed me to do that, leveraging faith to really insert myself in an organized religious spaces, leveraging scripture, saying, you know, what we're doing today is not, you know, in parallel with what it should be.

Now, the reason I kind of prefaced this with some personal stories is because I think it's very difficult for something as personal as faith. Despite the fact that I, you know, I will personally admit, I love data and statistics more than anybody—and everybody who knows me knows that—but it's something so incredibly personal that [with] freedom of religion, I could list off all of the data points, all of the reasons, you know, the statistically important. The fact that regardless of whether or not percentages of religiosity go down in parts of the world, they go up in other parts that it is quite cyclical, but it ebbs and flows, that it's still is a significant foundation for a lot of our legal structure around the world. There is no country that's immune, you know what I mean? Even in the most secular of states, you know, the money still says, "In God we trust."

And so, the importance of religion, I don't think I need to overstate it. You know, I'd be preaching to the choir, we all realize just how impactful it is in our daily lives. But the reason I preface it by personal stories is because faith is inherently personal. It's inherently something that we gain strength from in whatever way, right, and some people have faith in their partner, their family, their job, whatever. You know, some people have faith in God. Some people have faith in their gardening skills, right? There is this idea that we have constructed that faith is somehow exclusive from every other, you know, sophisticated conversation, that it's archaic to be talking about the power of religion, and I actually think the way we move ourselves forward, in a large part of the conversations we're having around the world—in women's rights, in girl's education, in racial equality—is to look at how religion has played both a negative and a positive effect in those conversations—how has it organized for good? You know, in the United States during the movement in the 1960s, churches were a bastion of support—black churches—for the Civil Rights Movement. So how can we leverage organized religion that has always sought good or that has been, you know, part and parcel of good? And by the same token, we know that there are centers of faith that have been a bastion for negative influence. And how can we create systems and structures that can actually engage a broader community to better understand faith so that we're not only getting you know, one lens from mainstream media or one lens from what we see on Facebook, but how can we actually amplify faith communities to be able to speak up about what they fundamentally believe in, in different parts of the world? And how can we amplify those that we most often ignore within those faith communities, those women, those minorities, you know? A lot of the inequalities that play in our own public life are also replicated within our own faith communities. I mean, at the end of the day, you know, religion is our texts, the Quran, the Torah, the Bible, scripture, at the end of the day, it is text, and you know, it does take human interpretation. And unfortunately, we interpret based on our own experiences. And sometimes those are exclusive

experiences. They're flawed experiences, sometimes they're violent experiences. And so I think we also have to be honest about who we give a microphone to, and who we who we amplify within our faith communities.

And the last thing that I think I want to leave everyone with when it comes to why religious freedom is so important to me is that I personally know I would not be here, where I am: not in my work, not in my personal life, not in the impact that I've had on the world had it not been for my faith.

I grew up with parents who are devout Muslims, and who, you know, when I would do something wrong, I remember I would be terrified, and my mum would always say to me, you know, God's mercy is greater than his wrath. And when I was particularly terrified, my mom would say, you know, God is more merciful than your parents' times 100. So all the love and the mercy that I have for you imagine that God has that 100 times. God is always looking for ways to support and to excuse you and to see the good in you, and I remember how powerful that was as a child to hear that I could only ever improve, that there was always a space for me, and that I was always held kind of in this sacred trust with God, if that makes sense. And that if I had a problem, I had a place to turn to, if I had a challenge, I had a place to go. And that's not to say I didn't need to, as I grew up, leverage other things. That's not to say, I didn't need to go and seek out, you know, support when I needed, you know, medical support or social support or whatever it might be. But it is to say that growing up, it gave me the sense of infinite possibility that even if I made a mistake, I could apologize. Even if I wanted to try something, I should just go for it, you know, and I feel that that amount of power, I think, is transformational.

That's why religion does exist in the way it exists today, and it has for centuries, and I think to be able to afford that same freedom, for you to pick and choose if you want it. For you to pick what you want to have faith in. But for that faith to be supported and accepted, and for people to recognize that we may fundamentally believe in different things, but at the end of the day, regardless of who you pray to, how often you pray, where you're praying, that at the end of the day, we're both probably getting the same thing from our belief system. We're both probably getting support and mercy and compassion and love. And that's why we feel so connected to it. And that our job isn't necessarily to challenge one another because we're all kind of going up the same hill from different directions. But our job is to challenge those who, who use faith and who use organized religion in a way that only seeks power without compassion. In a way that is devastating. in a way that is violent. Because the only people who can truly speak up to them, I think are other people of faith.

You know, so it's such an intimate conversation, and this is such an unintended way to speak, you know, through a camera. You're probably sitting at home, your kids might be making noise in the background or, you know, you're wondering where you're going to do in a month. You know, you're wondering if September you're going to be back in class or, I mean, it's such an un intimate way to speak, because we don't actually get to connect and have kind of, I think some of the difficult conversations that come, you know, to light when we're talking about freedom of faith. We don't get to have some of those honest conversations, particularly today that we need to be having about how we can uplift and support and amplify one another even in the most difficult of times.

And yet, you know, regardless of the way that we have to have this conversation, I'm really grateful that you're doing it anyways. That this, you know, that Brigham Young University, that all of you are here, that this platform exists. Because in so many parts of the world, I mean, freedom starts with first being able to talk about it. And that just isn't possible, right? And to be able to hear different perspectives. And to be able to recognize that each of our perspectives have relevance and legitimacy,

particularly to us, but also to a lot of people who probably feel the same way. So, I'm grateful that this platform exists. I'm grateful that we're having this conversation. I'm here to have more of it. I wish I could be there to answer some questions and to actually get to engage in what I know would have been an incredible conversation.

But I will leave you with one critical question and that is, if you are a person of faith, how are you leveraging your faith to ensure equality? How are you leveraging what you know, to create compassion and mercy and challenge a lot of what we've been taught about power and strength? How are you leveraging your faith, and I'll take it even a step further to say, even if you do not have a faith community, but in whatever space you hold power, if it's a university, if it's your faith community, if it's your own home, especially your own home, how are you leveraging that sphere of power that you own to create opportunity and space for others to have difficult conversations? Are you challenging the people closest to you on often times some of their more archaic or exclusive or negligent views their sexist or racist views? Are you are you having those difficult conversations at home?

Because I think the very core of what I've learned about Islam, at least I think about everything, is that it is just. It's accountable. Right? And in Islam, we have a very famous Hadith that you speak up against those who have caused injustice even if they are your own parents or siblings or Children, and I think that is the test that we're in right now is how, how will we show up for one another? How will we show up for the rights of one another? Recognizing that if they can come for you and yours then they'll probably come for me in mine next. So, I think this is a really important time for us to have these honest conversations, and I'm grateful we're starting here. Thank you guys so much. I hope you guys have an incredible day, and I am here for any questions or concerns. Feel free to reach out.