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***A Robust Understanding of Tolerance Must Be
Rooted in Human Dignity, Conscience, and Reason***

"We are either brethren in our beliefs, or brethren in our shared humanity"

Session on

"The Charter of the New Alliance of Virtue:
An Opportunity for Global Peace"

December 11, 2019

10:30 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Sixth Assembly of the Forum for Promoting Peace
Abu Dhabi

The moderator is Dr Ali al-Nuaimi, the Chairman of Hedayah, and your fellow panelists will be Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al-Jarwan (President of the Global Council for Tolerance and Peace); Dr Youssef Hmito (Director of Research and Publishing at al-Muwatta Centre), and Rabbi Yehuda Sarna (Executive Director at the Centre for Jewish Student Life at NYU).

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I am honored to be here representing the Religious Freedom Institute in Washington, and to have an opportunity with my fellow panellists to consider how the "Charter of the New Alliance of Virtue" can contribute to global peace.

According to our program notes for this session: "This new charter will elevate religious freedom, cooperation, and tolerance from mere possibilities to necessary ethical commitments and legal obligations, especially in relation to the protection

of places of worship whose attacks have threatened freedom of religion in many parts of the world."

The ambition to "elevate religious freedom" to "ethical commitments and legal obligations" is indeed refreshing, and it is worth taking a moment to remind ourselves why religious freedom matters. I will do so primarily based on my own Christian theological understandings, fully aware that my Jewish and Muslim colleagues can provide a similar analysis using their own traditions as a base.

First, religious freedom is important because religion is important.

Second, religion is important because human beings by our very nature are "religious"; we are emphatically not animals with only material needs for food and shelter. Human beings invariably ask questions about ultimate reality, about God and transcendence, about what meaning our lives have and whether God has some claim on how we ought to live.

At the dawn of the birth of the American experiment in democracy, American Founder James Madison defined religion as "the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it."¹ In other words, religion for most of us is not just asking questions about ultimate reality, but discerning our obligation to God to live in a manner consistent with a conscience rooted in the Divine.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine wrote: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You."² Sociologists confirm that the great majority of the world's people consider themselves adherents to some form of religion.³ Those Western societies which have become irreligious, or even hostile to religion, over the last two hundred years, are clearly out of step with the rest of

¹ James Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments," in Robert A. Rutland and William M.E. Rachal, eds, *The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 8 (University of Chicago Press, 1973), 295.

² St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Chapter, 1.

³ For confirmation of this point and for a brilliant presentation on the importance of religious freedom, see Timothy Samuel Shah, *Religious Freedom. Why Now? Defending an Embattled Human Right*, The Witherspoon Institute Task Force on International Religious Freedom, Princeton, New Jersey 2012. Dr. Thomas F. Farr, the president of the Religious Freedom Institute, was the Chairman of the Task Force.

the world, and the confident prediction that religion would naturally die out has proven to be completely false.⁴

Religious freedom is not an esoteric issue, undeserving of attention from governments and diplomats, for the free exercise of religion is perhaps the most potent antidote to many of the ills of society and is an indispensable ingredient for society's healthy maturation. George Washington, America's first president, in his 1796 farewell address, stated: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."⁵ Such an affirmation is fully consistent with Article 7 of "The Charter of the New Alliance of Virtue" which affirms:

At its base, respect for another's religion is respect for human dignity. Human beings are by their nature truth seekers. When they believe they have discovered religious truth, they deserve -- by virtue of their humanity -- the respect of their fellow human beings. As such, respect for another's religion is a primary virtue that supports both individual human flourishing and the common good.

From the religious standpoint, for human beings to deny the existence of God and His life-giving, society-affirming truths -- truths which are transcendent and not of our own making -- is a prescription for human tragedy.

The exact same point was made in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019, by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,"

the most important causes of the crises of the modern world are a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and a prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that

⁴ See the works of the respected sociologist Peter Berger for confirmation of this point.

⁵ George Washington, "Farewell Address," September 19, 1796, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65539>

deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles.⁶

This "moral deterioration" has an impact on international crises and results, as the document points out,

in a weakening of spiritual values and responsibility. All this contributes to a general feeling of frustration, isolation and desperation leading many to fall either into a vortex of atheistic, agnostic or religious extremism, or into blind and fanatic extremism, which ultimately encourage forms of dependency and individual or collective self-destruction.

In the final analysis, St. Augustine is simply restating the key anthropological truth embraced by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, alike, as found in Genesis 1:27 and Sahih Bukhari, No. 6227: "God created man in his own image." This is why religious freedom is so profoundly important. Any abridgment of that religious freedom strikes simultaneously at the heart of human flourishing and at that which preserves and ennobles human society, for it is empirically demonstrable that there is a direct and positive correlation between the presence of religious freedom in a society and a vast array of societal benefits.

In fact, one of the distinctive features of the Charter is its embrace of a far broader notion of religious freedom than simply the "freedom of worship"-- that truncated, privatized view of religion which confines religion to that which takes place within the four walls of a mosque, synagogue, or church. The Charter, in Article 4 (paragraph 2), insists that not only must there be "no compulsion in religion or belief," but "it is the responsibility of the State to protect religious freedom, including diversity of religions, which guarantees justice and equality among all members of society." I take this to mean a promotion of full citizenship as affirmed in Article 8.

⁶ February 4, 2019. See: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html

Consistent with the Marrakesh Declaration of 2016 which affirms the rights of minorities in predominantly Muslim countries, Article 8 of the Charter states:

All ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities have the right to live without any persecution of any kind. Further, they have the right to live as full and equal citizens in their respective societies, drawing upon their most fundamental beliefs about virtue and morality to engage in the public life of those societies.

This is an absolutely critical point and without the freedom to act in public in a manner which is consistent with their beliefs, so long as they don't infringe on the rights of others, minorities would be deprived of their rights of full citizenship.

Unfortunately, "tolerance," as usually understood in the West, at least, as a "begrudging putting up with someone else's unwanted presence among us," is an impoverished notion of "tolerance" which could never stand up to the challenges of living together when our deepest differences irritate, confuse, or frighten us.

To be sure, a begrudging tolerance is much better than intolerance or persecution, but it is certainly not a worthy, robust social goal. How very different is the vision of tolerance embodied in the very first line of Pope Francis's and Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb's "Human Fraternity": "Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved."

We have been reminded during these days that if we are true to the Abrahamic vision, we will view the "other" not as an enemy or adversary. As Imam Ali (may God be pleased with him) taught: "men are either your brothers in religion or counterparts in creation." Or as our Forum program so beautifully put it: "We are either brethren in our beliefs, or brethren in our shared humanity."

A basic question is how is it possible for people of different tribes, nationalities, ethnicities, and particularly *different religions* to communicate with each other?

Let me suggest that the Charter provides the answer in numerous passages. In Article 3 (paragraph 3) the Charter makes clear that our shared values "transcend

culture, era, or region." These values include: "faith, kindness, prudence, and a belief in universal human dignity." The key is a shared belief in human dignity which is the property of all.

But how does the human family in all its diversity, find common insight and language to talk about the truth of human dignity and the universal virtues which are rooted in God rather than in narrow self-interest?

In a very famous hadith (Sahih al-Bukhari, No. 1250), an answer begins to emerge.

A funeral passed by the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, and he stood up. It was said to him, "It is a Jew." The Prophet said, "Was he not a soul?"

Also consider this passage from the Quran, Surah Isra [#17], verse 70:

*We have honored the children of Adam and carried them by land and sea;
We have provided good sustenance for them and favored them specially
above many of those We have created.*

(And the "we" here is the royal "we," for it is God who is understood to be speaking.)

The classical scholar Ibn Kathir said about this verse:

He [God] has given him hearing, sight and a heart with which to understand all of that, to benefit from it, and distinguish between things to know which are good for him and which are harmful, in both worldly and religious terms...

As I understand it, the notion that all human beings have an innate sense of what is right and wrong is known as "fitra." Even though the soul is inclined to evil, it nevertheless has the capacity to distinguish good from evil. As in the Christian tradition, this innate moral sense (or conscience) and reason (which can access Natural Law) are only components of Divine truth, for there is also Revelation.

Conscience and reason are the Divine gifts imparted to all -- and they allow all human beings, religious and non-religious alike,⁷ to communicate with each other and to find common ground. This is the bedrock truth which undergirds the realism of "The Charter of the New Alliance of Virtue."

In short, God Himself has given us the capacity through reason and conscience, as supplemented by Revelation, to know that He Himself has given human dignity to all whom he has created. And He has given each of us a deeply innate sense of what is right and wrong, of what the virtues are which are necessary to respond to human needs with compassion and mercy, to live together as brothers and sisters as God intended us to do.

"The Charter of the New Alliance of Virtue" challenges each of us to live in harmony with each other, to do God's will in our lives, and to attend with mercy to those who are most in need.

Indeed, we must never, never forget that: ***"We are either brethren in our beliefs, or brethren in our shared humanity."*** For this is the deepest meaning of "The Charter."

Thank you.

⁷ It should be noted that the February 2019 joint statement "Human Fraternity" also notes the possibility of finding a common language with nonbelievers. It asserts that the declaration "is an invitation to reconciliation and fraternity among all believers, indeed among believers and non-believers, and among all people of good will.... this Declaration may be an appeal to every upright conscience."