
SECTION 2.2

BLACK HISTORY MONTH: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

The observation of the Black History month started in the UK in October 1987 and it has become a popular event that different stakeholders look forward to annually over the past 34 years. The primary objective of the event every year is to acknowledge and highlight the positive contributions and achievements that people of African and Caribbean heritage have made to society in the UK and other places where the event is held. However, the event also signifies the important need to address the evil of racism and to campaign against its continued spread in the UK and globally.

The importance of addressing the is reflected in the fact that the non-acknowledgement of the important contributions that Black people make to society in the UK and elsewhere, which Black History month is aimed at correcting, is actually a consequence of racism. It is racism that creates the barrier of non-recognition and non-acknowledgement of the efforts and achievements of Black people in most societies of the world today.

While it is appreciated that acknowledging and celebrating the positive contributions and achievements that Black people make to society can certainly inspire Black youth to aspire to make positive contributions to society in their different fields of endeavour, the prevalence of racial inequalities in society can be an impediment that denies them the opportunity or platform to perform in the first place. For example, in the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)'s 2019/2020 report on Higher Education Staff Statistics issued in January 2021 showed that of about 23,000 professors in UK universities, only 155 are Black, which is less than one per cent. In such a situation the opportunities for Black academics to make noticeable contributions at senior academic levels in the UK educational sector, in comparison to their 18,770 white counterparts, is literally infinitesimal. The Secretary General of the University and College Union (UCU), Dr Jo Grady, has rightly stated that "universities must do more to ensure a more representative mix of staff at a senior level and stop this terrible waste of talent." The situation is likely similar in other sectors too and needs to be corrected to ensure equal opportunities for people of Black heritage.

Although the observation of Black History Month was initially restricted to educational institutions, it is pleasing to see that it has now extended to other important sectors of society. It is therefore important to advocate that every sector of society should endeavour to use Black History Month as a medium for promoting an end to racism and advocating equality of opportunities for all peoples of colour, but particularly people of Black heritage as statistics always show that they are the most disadvantaged in terms of equality of opportunities in almost every sector of society in the UK, the US and other parts of the Western world despite developmental advancements. The rise in Islamophobia makes the case of Black Muslims more severe with regard to encountering racial cum religious discrimination and enjoying equal opportunities in different sectors of society in the UK today. It was therefore a very significant and commendable effort in the right direction for SOAS, University of London to partner with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and other stakeholders to hold the very successful Proudly Muslim and Black Conference with the theme "Exploring Black Muslim Heritage and History in the UK" in February 2019 on the SOAS Campus at Russell Square in London, attended by over 300 participants. The outcome of the conference was a call for more research and

documentation of the Black Muslim experience in the UK to facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of diversity in the UK. In my role as Professor of Laws at SOAS, University of London, a world leading institution for research and study of the Middle East, Asia and Africa, I believe it will enhance our partnership with the MCB in the effort to contribute to eradicating racism in the UK, and in giving brief Islamic perspective to boost the advocacy to use the Black History Month as medium for ending racism globally.

Islamic sources acknowledge race and ethnicity as natural phenomena that should be positively appreciated and accommodated, and not negatively exploited to discriminate against or despise any human being anywhere. Prior to the prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH)¹ and the revelation of the Qur'an, racism was rife in Arabia and other parts of the world then, with racial and tribal wars being a common occurrence everywhere. Those who could not boast of worthy tribal ancestry were despised, even if they had lived in Arabia for a long period and spoke the Arabic language fluently, similar to what many people of Black heritage face today in the UK and the Western world. To confront that racist and ethnocentric social order at the time, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) gave Bilal ibn Rabah, a liberated Black African slave of Ethiopian heritage, the honour and privilege of being appointed as the first main caller to prayer (mu'adhin) in Islam at that very early stage of the religion. Some of the Arab nobles at the time were displeased about this and they made sarcastic racial comments about Bilal ibn Rabah. Consequently, a Qur'anic verse, which has toady become the Islamic mantra against racism globally, was revealed rebuking the Arab nobles for their sarcastic racial comments about Bilal, and unambiguously prohibited racial, ethnic and tribal derision and discrimination amongst humanity generally as follows: "O Mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other. The most honoured of you in the sight of God is he who is most righteous amongst you. And God has full knowledge and is well-acquainted with all things" (Qur'an, Chapter 49, verse 13). After the revelation, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is reported to have given a sermon in which he addressed the people as follows: "Oh people! God has removed the evils and arrogance of the pre-Islamic period (jahiliyyah) from you" and then referred to the above-mentioned verse.

Thus, in the words of the Hungarian scholar of Islam, Ignaz Goldziher, who is considered as the founder of Islamic studies in Europe, through the revelation of that verse "a profound breach was made in the ideas of the Arab people about the relationship of tribes to another." There is consensus amongst both classical and contemporary Muslim exegetes of the Qur'an that this verse established the prohibition of racial or ethnic discrimination and derision under Islamic law as early as the 7th century. For example, the 13th century exegete, al-Baydawi, stated in his Qur'anic exegesis, *Anwar al-tanzil wa-asrar al-ta'wil*, that the verse establishes the fact that all human beings are equal and there is no basis for superiority on grounds of lineage or race. Also in explaining this verse, Sayyid Qutb stated in his Qur'anic exegesis, *Fiz zilal al-Qur'an*, that God's purpose of creating humanity into nations, races, and tribes is not to "stir up conflict and enmity [but] for the purpose of getting to know one another and living peacefully together." Similarly, Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdud observed in his Qur'anic exegesis, *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, that in this verse "the whole of mankind has been addressed to reform it of the great evil that has been causing universal disruption in the world, that is, the prejudices due to race, colour, language, country and nationality." And finally, according to Mufti Muhammad

Shafi' in his Qur'anic exegesis, *Ma'ariful Qur'an*, this verse "proceeds to set down the basis of an all-comprehensive and all-pervading principle of human equality [and] has firmly laid the axe at the false and foolish notions of superiority, born of racial arrogance or national conceit."

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is reported to have re-emphasized the prohibition of racial or ethnic discrimination and enmity in his last sermon before his death. He is reported to have stated, *inter alia*, "O People! Be aware that your God is One. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab and a non-Arab has no superiority over an Arab, and no white person has any superiority over a Black person, and no Black person has any superiority over a white person, except on the basis of righteousness. The most honourable among you in the sight of God is the most righteous [...] Let those who are present convey this to those who are absent."

Based on these injunctions, Islam clearly prohibits any legal distinctions based on race or ethnicity. It is submitted that the above Islamic precept against racism can contribute positively to the suppression of racism globally and complement international efforts at eradicating racism in modern times, if the world can take counsel from it.

The launching of this report again at the SOAS Campus where the initial conference on "Exploring Black Muslim Heritage and History in the UK" was held in 2019, signifies the productive partnership between SOAS and MCB and the other stakeholders in the celebration of the annual Black History Month to showcase the great contributions that Black Muslims are making to society in the UK, but more importantly as a medium for advocating an end to racism in the UK and globally.



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⁶ Peace be upon him. Honorific, denoting respect.