

This final recommendation is not just desirable but in fact essential. Without knowing the full extent of the issues, we will always be at a disadvantage in trying to seek solutions to address them. The recommendations are not exhaustive or intended to be ‘final’ solutions – simply a starting point.

The Black Lives Matter movement was borne out of the inequalities suffered by Black people at the hands of the CJS and yet many Muslims think it isn’t a Muslim issue. This is in spite of the number of Black Muslims in the community (see Ali 2015). Justice must be accessible to all for it to truly be Justice. The Muslim community needs to be concerned about issues affecting all for it to be united and true to its teachings.



FATIMA MUHAMMED

Fatima Muhammed qualified as a Barrister and has worked in the Criminal Justice Sector for many years. She has worked on cases and legal issues across multiple jurisdictions and has studied Race and Law and the impact of Western legal systems on minority groups

Please note that this has been written in a personal capacity and views expressed are not necessarily representative of any organisation

BLACK MUSLIMS IN UK PRISONS

BY ABU HAJIRAH

Amazing are the ways of a believer for there is good in every affair of his and this is not the case with anyone else except in the case of a believer, for if he has an occasion to feel delight, he thanks (God), thus there is a good for him in it, and if he gets into trouble and shows resignation (and endures it patiently), there is a good for him in it.

Sahih Muslim Chapter 13¹⁷

In 1999 Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) felt that the increasing number of Muslim prisoners warranted significant action and change. Data suggested at the time that the number of Muslim prisoners had doubled in 5 years. The first Muslim adviser Masood Ahmed was appointed and given a small team to look at the issues posed by the increase in the Muslims numbers. These were at approximately 4,500 as reported by the media (BBC, 1999). The official offender equality data was not published by HMPPS until 2013.

This turning point was welcome but also worrying. There was a recognition that Muslims were a significant demographic that required support in ensuring they could practice their religion, have halal meals, and offer congregational prayer on Friday (jum'uah) within the prison system. But it also raised concerns as it was a realisation that Muslims were committing more crimes and entering prison in increasing numbers.

Fast forward to 2020 where the numbers of Muslims both in Britain have increased to projected figures of close to 3.5 million. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 2018 published data that showed there are 3.4 million Muslims in Britain based on the Annual Population Survey (Office for National Statistics, 2018). The ONS data show the Muslim community has grown since the last census in 2011 when the population of Muslims was of 2.7 million (Office for National Statistics, 2012).

These demographics are not reflected in the prison system where the Muslim population has increased more rapidly to close to 14,000 which is 13% of the prison population, a significant figure (Ministry of Justice, 2019). It is of deep concern that Muslims in increasing numbers are falling foul of the law and being put in prison.

This paper highlights some of the ethnic and religious dimensions of the changing demographic of the prison population in Britain. It relies on data from published studies and qualitative data from the perspective of an officer of the HMPPS. It shows that the prison system is culturally and religiously heterogeneous. It makes the case that cultural and religious requirements are not met appropriately and this is affecting how well supported Black Muslim prisoners are by their faith communities after they leave the prison system.

RACE, FAITH, AND CHALLENGES OF MUSLIM PRISONERS

One of the reasons for increasing numbers may be attributed to the numbers of prisoners accepting Islam within prison. There are a number of charities and individuals who the current Muslim Advisor Ahtsham Ali supports who provide essential services for Muslims in prison. Another difference between the demographics of British Muslims and Muslims in the prison

¹⁷ 2999 Book 55 Hadith 82

system is the larger proportion of prisoners from the Black African and African origin communities. It is thought that approximately 40% of the Muslim population is Black with around 45% Asian and 15% others.

Data indicate that Black Muslims are often doubly discriminated against. The Young Review in 2014¹⁸ alluded to this and it was further highlighted by the recent David Lammy recommendations (2017) where he pointed out negative outcomes for Black prisoners across a number of metrics in the CJS with 13 recommendations for HMPPS. He also made particular mention of negative outcomes for Muslims across a similar number of metrics due to the large numbers of Black Muslims.

The social dynamics of the prison system is different from larger Muslim community dynamics. Firstly, because of the perceived divide between the Muslim communities, also although we are all Muslims the communities rarely mix outside of prison except in some well-respected communities in South London and Birmingham. However inside prison their mixing and 'brotherhood' is more prevalent. The brotherhood is something sought after for knowledge and protection. As one Muslim convert ex-offender has put it "The reason why I became Muslim in prison was due to the brotherhood. Sometimes it can be a dangerous place but on the 2's (wing in the jail) the Muslims run the wing so no one messes with you."¹⁹

Unfortunately, diversity is not reflected in the Muslim chaplain experience where more than 80% of Muslim chaplains are from an Asian background many from predominately Asian communities and have little in common with Black people or Black Muslims. Joliffe and Haque (2017) reported:

One Black Muslim prisoner noted that it was important to have more BME staff as it would address the broader issue of white staff 'looking down' on BME people as seeing them as 'just prisoners': just having a few BME staff will get white staff used to seeing BMEs as equal.

Further, an example of cultural dissonance was an Asian Imam saying "You know, this race [Black] are hot headed. [Imam, Cat B prison]." This is a clear example of the lack of cultural competence that has a negative effect upon Black Muslims in prison.

The practice of Islam is often different with different fiqh (jurisprudence) and understandings which are compounded by different understandings of the community element for Black Muslims. Many Black Muslims converts do not have a Black Muslim community to fall back on where they could get support from and have their community partake in charity programs that help Muslim prisoners except a few. St Giles Trust (2018) and Connect Futures did a study looking into some of these areas with Muslim prisoners. They both concluded that more work is needed to support the Muslim community in prison and there should be a better awareness and understanding of cultural and religious issues and how this impacts upon rehabilitation in establishments.

¹⁸ Young, L. (2014). The Young Review. Improving Outcomes for Young Black and/or Muslim Men in the Criminal Justice System. Clinks [Chaired by Baroness Lola Young]. <https://www.clinks.org/publication/young-review>

¹⁹ External Interview

This phenomenon of Muslim chaplains is unique to the situation in the UK and attributed to the local history of Muslim communities.

CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT ON BLACK MUSLIMS

Data from the 2011 Census confirms that the largest Muslim communities are Asian and they have been established for decades. The Asian communities have also transported their religious teachings and access to knowledge through their seminaries such as the Dar ul Uloom in Bury and other locations. These have become recognised places of learning and more importantly for our topic recognised by government organisations as places where their qualifications are accepted. As part of the recruitment process for Prison Chaplains the requirement is to have a recognised Islamic qualification and to have a good connection with a Muslim community. With so many Asian graduates from these seminaries, the road to become a chaplain(which is paid at a much better rate than an imam in a masjid²⁰ normally) is natural for them. Taking up this position is highly sought after and when positions become vacant, they are quickly taken with chaplains sometimes travelling great distances to take up the opportunity.

The same cannot be said for the Black Muslim communities who do not have that internal / local recognised centres of learning. Many Black Imams across the *masaajid*²¹ in the UK have been educated in other countries. Black reverts²² often become educated at the Islamic University in Medina, or other notable places of learning such as Mauritania, Jordan, or Egypt and some have tried the local route with the recent centres of learning in the UK. But the key is which centre helps you to connect to your own community and the community within the prison that the Muslim Chaplain (imam) serves.

Because the imam also plays a key role for rehabilitation and release they must have connections to the communities that the Black Muslim will be released into. They must be able to leverage the important stakeholders in the community to support the rehabilitation, by providing jobs and alternatives to a life of crime, help for their social ills, and ultimately help them to reconnect with their faith.

If we return to the understanding of the cultural diversity of Black Muslims in HMPPS then we must also understand that a significant portion have come from difficult beginnings and from diverse communities. Stories of war-torn countries like Somalia and Libya are well known, and for reverts the poverty that many of the Black communities in the UK extend from. The most densely populated Black Muslim areas - following the data from the previous Census in 2011 - such as Lambeth, and Southwark who have a number of Black-led masaajid, some characterised by cultural and linguistic norms and practices that are unique to their communities.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUSLY APPROPRIATE RESPONSES TO REHAB

For many years HMPPS has been trying to resolve the issues around overrepresentation of Black people in prison and how best to rehabilitate them. There is evidence that cultural understandings as well as the role of faith can play productive roles in rehabilitating Black Muslim prisoners (see Joliffe and Haque 2017: 27).

²⁰ Mosque
²¹ Mosque (plural)
²² Converts to Islam

For many years HMPPS has been trying to resolve the issues around overrepresentation of Black people in prison and how best to rehabilitate them. There is evidence that cultural understandings as well as the role of faith can play productive roles in rehabilitating Black Muslim prisoners.

There are principles that are derived from faith that can be utilised in culturally-appropriate desistance interventions. We are reminded of the *hadith*²³ of Thumama, a prisoner, that was narrated on the authority of the scholar Abu Huraira:

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ²⁴) sent some horsemen to Najd. They captured a man from the tribe of Banu Hanifa and called Thumama. He was the chief of the people of Yamama. People bound him to one of the pillars of the mosque. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) came out to (see) him. He said: O Thumama, what do you think? He replied: Muhammad, I have good opinion of you. If you kill me, you will kill a person who has spilt blood. If you do me a favour, you will do a favour to a grateful person. If you want wealth, ask and you will get what you will demand. The Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) left him (in this condition) for two days, (and came to him again) and said: What do you think, O Thumama? He replied: What I have already told you. If you do a favour, you will do a favour to a grateful person. If you kill me, you will kill a person who has spilt blood. If you want wealth, ask and you will get what you will demand. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) left him until the next day when he (came to him again) and said: What do you think, O Thumama? He replied: What I have already told you. If you do me a favour, you will do a favour to a grateful person. If you kill me, you will kill a person who has spilt blood. If you want wealth, ask and you will get what you will demand. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: Set Thumama free. He went to a palm-grove near the mosque and took a bath. Then he entered the mosque and said: I bear testimony (to the truth) that there is no god but Allah and I testify that Muhammad is His bondman and His messenger. O Muhammad, by Allah, there was no face on the earth more hateful to me than your face, but (now) your face has become to me the dearest of all faces. By Allah, there was no religion more hateful to me than your religion, but (now) your religion has become the dearest of all religions to me. By Allah, there was no city more hateful to me than your city, but (now) your city has become the dearest of all cities to me.

We see that due to fair treatment and understanding of the Prophet (PBUH) and the companions, a prisoner rehabilitated his ways. Such examples illustrate the relevance of faith for designing appropriate interventions to help Muslim prisoners manage and prepare for leaving prison. A nuanced understanding of the Muslim community and resources for creating culturally sensitive interventions are important. Interventions need to be presented in a way that is

²³ Report, or account of the practices and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace be Upon Him
²⁴ Arabic Translation of ‘peace be upon him’

sensitive to cultural differences without flattening faith as one all encompassing category as Joliffe and Haque (2017) highlighted in their report. This was previously understood but has been somewhat abandoned by authorities post-2010, thus missing out on previously by the successful Black Muslim-led projects launched back in 2006 with the STREET project lead by Dr Abdul Haqq Baker and the lesser-known but overwhelmingly successful SIRAAT project which worked with over 300 Black Muslims in prison between 2006 and 2011 helping them to better understand Islam, and their rehabilitation from an erroneous Islamic ideology.

CONCLUSION

This essay has explored how faith communities have a number of resources to draw on as well as a support system for prisoners as they transition back into society. Cultural understandings involving not just race but faith can play crucial roles in rehabilitating Black Muslim prisoners.

One of the many things which we must learn in this period of efforts to embolden racial justice in our society is that cultural competence and history are more than just significant elements in the puzzle. Cultural competence in engaging a diverse community of Muslims in the prison service in the UK is critical to ensuring their needs are catered for and are better prepared for life after prison.



ABU HAJIRAH

Abu Hajirah works in the criminal justice system for the Ministry of Justice and has done for over 25 years.

Son of a teacher and a prominent family in Guyana, he is a revert to Islam who has studied Islam in a number of countries including Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UK under a number of Islamic scholars.

He is one of the directors of a Mosque and Islamic cultural centre in South London which has led the fight against Islamic extremism from the early Nineties, whilst supporting

the community to find solace in practicing Islam un the UK.

During this time he has been involved in many projects that support Muslims from providing aid and spiritual support to refugees and those in need in Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, Gambia , Yemen, Palestine and many localities.

THE IMPACT OF THE
IMMIGRATION POLICY AND THE
HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT ON
BLACK MUSLIMS

BY BILIKISU SAVAGE