
THE WRONG TYPE OF MUSLIM

BY COUNCILLOR SORAYA ADEJARE

No, I did not covert, no I am not a member of the Nation of Islam, no I did not marry a Muslim. Alongside always having to explain my ethnic heritage as a means of allowing others to feel I have a legitimate claim in describing myself as a Muslim, these are the answers to questions I am often faced with when, as a non hijab wearing Black woman, I profess my religion at public events. These are responses those of dominant Muslim groups never have to give and this in itself is a marker as to the issues Black Muslims face in this country. As a minority, there is a silence in respect of the intersectional issues which affect us, despite the fact that they are so visible at every tranche of representation, and within every organisation.

BACKGROUND

As evidenced in the last sermon⁴² of Prophet Mohamed (PBUH⁴³), equality and the demonstration of equality are a key Islamic tenet. The reality is that as a Black Muslim outside the parameters of Black nations, unconscious bias, and indeed institutional racism impacts upon the experience of those of us residing in the United Kingdom, at times making the concept of the worldwide community a distant one. As a British Muslim community we are beset with a racial hierarchies which we see dominate all positions, political or otherwise and across every social setting, these hierarchies excluding, by design or default, Black Muslims.

At every stage of my life, I have experienced a society which overlooks the contribution of Black Muslims, or indeed fails to adequately address the concept of inclusion, both within and outside of the British Muslim community. This began at the stage I began *madrassa*⁴⁴ where I entered a setting comprised, other than my family, of Muslims of South Asian heritage. Students had to be convinced I was a Muslim, and my treatment, and that of my siblings, at the hands of our tutors differed immensely solely as a direct result of our ethnicity. We were alienated with there being no compunction for those that led the school to create an inclusive setting. This even extended to sermons being undertaken in Urdu. This isolation has been reflected at every stage of my life from university and Muslim student organisations, through to my experience in a multitude of mosques. Yes, I do experience the hand of friendship and I take joy in the opening up of all mosques during Ramadan for community *iftars*⁴⁵ and other engagement activities, but my experience is such that I have found, there are some who retain the principle of an exclusive club, and my not being on the guest list.

IT'S ALL POLITICS

It goes without saying that our lives at every juncture are shaped by politics, whether soft or hard, and that within this tribalism is played out in our daily interactions. We see this occur in our places of work, educational institutions, the justice system, commerce, and yes, this extends to religious organisations of every persuasion. Without exception, bodies, irrespective of their function, are led by those who represent a majority group, and which largely represents the majority interests.

⁴⁴ Islamic education, often offered in the form of Sunday school

⁴⁵ Breaking of the fast, sometimes organised in communal environments

The Black Lives Matter movement has rightly brought to the fore the fact that Black people are subject to systemic racism in every section of society. This treatment affects everything from educational outcomes to employment opportunities, and everything in between. It is clear that majority interests often are exclusive albeit not necessarily intentionally. Nevertheless they result in oversights and an inability to address the needs of the minority.

As a Black Muslim working within the political sphere, the prejudice I have experienced in close quarters is replicated across this sector where there remains an hierarchy in respect of Muslim inclusion. On a fundamental basis, I have been overlooked when members of my party extend Eid greetings to my peers. Although a minor indiscretion, I can only imagine that as a Black Muslim who does not wear a hijab, it is difficult for some to retain a connection with my physicality and my religion.

Taking the concept of exclusion further, we always see elements of institutional racism rear its head in political selection processes, particularly within parliamentary selections. In respect of those who make the decisions, it can appear that they base them upon an unspoken algorithm which suggests Black Muslims will not generate the support those of Asian, Middle Eastern or Turkish heritage can expect. These communities are, without exception, the 'go tos' in respect of meeting the 'gold standard' of Muslim representation. These decisions, despite being applauded by many as we stand grateful for Muslim representation of any kind, are akin to colonialist approaches whereby subjective values are perpetually reproduced. Identity construction underpins the positioning of Black Muslims in this country, with the colour of our skin and ethnic heritage framing much of our experience. Ultimately, we do not fit the normal physical, or lingua franca, expectations of what it is to be a Muslim in mainstream society. The failures within parliamentary selections have to be seen in light of the fact that even in local government Black representation in general does not, in any local authority, reflect the makeup of the areas served.

As a member of a political party, I can say that although the 2019 elections saw an increase in Muslim representation, both in candidates and in securing parliamentary seats, the omission of Black Muslims passed without comment, other than among Black Muslims. Alongside every other political party no inroads were made whatsoever in terms of progression in respect of Black Muslims, nor were any attempts made to address this. This is a failure of both political parties and the approach of the Muslim collective, both of which overlook the importance of Black representation in all its forms. This has to be seen in light of Black communities' continuous calls for increased representation across the board, something which has not as yet been replicated by Muslim organisations in support of Black Muslims; undoubtedly, the question has to be, why?

In preparing for this submission, I took the step of looking up lists of those within the Muslim community considered worthy of recognition, or whose political appointments were considered significant in local government. I again discovered a clear emphasis on those of South Asian heritage. There are some within the Muslim community who will know the name of the first ever Muslim Mayor/Speaker, and the youngest ever Muslim Mayor/Speaker all of

whom have been celebrated, but would they know the name of the first ever Black female or male Muslim Mayor/Speaker. They could hazard a guess, but I sense they would ultimately be wrong. Black, Muslim civic representation passed under the radar of the British Muslim community, the significance not being acknowledged or deemed worthy of recognition.

The terms of wider inclusion into political leadership or senior roles, are currently not part of an ongoing discussion. Instead, they remain fixed in advance in a somewhat linear way, placing limitations on who can and cannot enter this arena. While we can all cite teachings which outline the fact that we are all born equal and will die equal, within current systems the Black Muslim remains the subordinate.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, what should be overriding all of our actions as British Muslims is the primacy of equality and piety over racial hierarchies; in the political world this is far from a reality. Despite discrimination being prohibited in Islam, the reality is that the concept of *ummah*⁴⁶ still does not fully extend to the Black Muslim community in Britain.

Although, in tokenistic gestures, Black politicians are often included in conversations centred on anti-racism, the intersectional experience of the Black Muslim is, without exception, overlooked. After Christianity we are the second largest religious community in the country, and while we are all faced with the growing threat of Islamophobia, Black Muslims also face institutional racism perpetuated within our own community.

We are also a community with a young demographic and there is a need for us to collectively address the structural conditions we mimic and perpetuate, none of which have any basis in Islam. The hope lies in the discrimination Black Muslims experience being consigned to history; this extends beyond dialogue to actually implementing substantive actions ensuring we have a place at the table and voices which are heard. Although few in number, we have more Black Muslims holding political positions than ever before, and there is a need for them to ensure that the anti-racist agenda is furthered until such time that we are on equal footing.

The nature of our institutions is that they remain rooted in structures which appear to many Black Muslims as inaccessible. Many were understandably created by and for specific demographics during a time when we were all far more isolated. In lacking essential support from wider society we were led to have systems in place which promoted singular group interests and focussed on the needs of singular groups. Nevertheless, in much the same way that councils and other public institutions have recognised that they must comprehensively address institutional racism and resulting inequalities, there is a need for this to be replicated within organisations which represent the interests of Muslims.

It goes without saying that there is no system which has managed to overcome the hierarchies

⁴⁶ Defined as 'community.' A reference to a global 'community' of Muslims

it perpetuates. However social equality and equity underpins our faith and we must be at the forefront of ensuring this is fully realised. Within this, our institutions must make clear their commitment to an anti-racism agenda, inclusive of processes which allow full participation and representation at every level. Before this can happen a certain degree of introspection must be undertaken; if Black Muslims are not engaged, then clearly the modes of operation do not serve their needs.

Cross-pollination is a way of immediately breaking down barriers; one cannot truly understand the lived experience of others without gaining direct knowledge of their circumstances. As an umbrella organisation, the Muslim Council of Britain has at its disposal the means of initiating the types of cross denominational, and demographic, conversations which need to take place in order for us to begin to address the complexities of racial identity within our community.



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Cllr Soraya Adejare is the child of German and Nigerian parents and, alongside 8 siblings, grew up in Hackney, where she now brings up her daughter Nafeesah.

Her background is in Communications, skills she transferred to the teaching profession latterly becoming a secondary English teacher. Having a commitment to the principles of equity and equality, she became a councillor in Hackney in 2014 and has represented the ward of Dalston throughout this period.

SECTION 3.9

RELIGION & COMMUNITY LIFE