

We can Fight Racism – by Respecting Each Other

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Asalaamu-alaikum. (Peace be upon you)

Racism manifests itself in many, many different ways. In blatant (physical violence) and latent (institutional) forms. It is clever and sometimes even "clever-clever" (so clever it appears silly). It is perceived and actual. You can be racist wittingly, also un-wittingly. There are male and female perpetrators and victims. Young and old. Most of it is by the ethnic majority against the ethnic minority but in recent times there have been cases of it being the other way round. But where do we get racism from? Why does there appear to be a need to target a race / faith / culture (these do often blur into one) that then makes us feel better about ourselves?

Fear of the other. Myths, stereotypes and exaggerations will always happen when we restrict our personal interaction with our fellow human beings and rely upon information by people to form our morals, opinions and beliefs. Are some of us racist because of the 'island' mentality? We are cut off from the rest of Europe. What about the illusion of being part of a great empire? We ruled the world once (or at least our rulers did). Or is it jealousy? Why have they got something we haven't?

"I admit I've got racial problems but doesn't everyone?". 'Mancs' don't like 'Scousers', 'Jocks' don't like the English, the 'Blues' don't like the 'Reds', our lot don't like yours – it's as simple as that. Or is it? "Well don't you lot hate each other as well?". We are made aware Africans don't like Caribbeans, Indians don't like Pakistanis, Hindus (or for that matter Jews, Sikhs & Christians) don't like Muslims. We're also told that Muslims don't like anyone else! By citing other occurrences of conflict / rivalry / hatred between peoples, this does not give us a justification to harbour our own. By perpetuating divisions our society will not move forward and we will always be prone to be influenced by those who want to divide and rule over us.

In Old Testament times the itinerant Hebrew nation had a novel way of cleansing itself of any guilt arising from social sins. The religious leaders laid their hands on a goat and ceremoniously transferred the guilt of the people on to the goat. The beast was then driven outside the camp of Israel into the wilderness. From this ancient ritual we have developed the practice of 'scapegoating'. When something goes wrong in society and it is perceived that it is due to corporate wrongdoing we look for a scapegoat. We usually pick on the eccentric, the minorities and the unlovable – those who are different. Someone has to bear the guilt for society's ills so that the rest of us can rest easy in our own sense of self-righteous well-being. So from its Jewish origins in the temple to its modern media context, by blaming others or demonising others we divert away attention from possibly the real sources of society's problems. The Daily Mail around 50 or so years ago called the influx of persecuted Jews from Europe into Britain's ports an "outrage" but nowadays we can substitute Jews for Muslims / Kurds / Afghans / Africans / Refugees / Asylum seekers and the story more or less remains the same 50 years later and many readers accept it as they did then. It wasn't long ago that people of Irish heritage were being thought of as potential terrorists and a threat to our security. Currently it's Muslims.

'Housewives favourite', media personality Robert Kilroy-Silk wrote in his column for the Daily Express some years ago that he thought Islam was an evil religion and if he is thought of as a racist then "so be it". Did this comment influence his readers? Why was he so happy to brand himself a racist? Was this public comment the product of living in a free society where we can speak our minds? Surely you can't generalise to this large extent? Is every Muslim cleric a terrorist? Is every Christian cleric a paedophile?

I was part of a group that went to visit the Corrymeela community in Northern Ireland in 2001. We met Dean Lee, a Honk Kong Chinese Catholic from Belfast who whilst growing up there was attacked regularly for being 'Fenian scum' by Protestants and then attacked for being a 'chinky' so & so by his co-religionists. It seems your race can sometimes prevent you from seeking the identity you want, in Dean's case simply Northern Irish Christian. Samuel Johnson in 1775 did say that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel" – indeed.

Sitting in a friend's house one day, the daughter came home from school distressed. She had been verbally racially abused by some Asian schoolgirls on her way home. She was called an ugly white so & so, amongst other things. The discussion that followed really moved and humbled me when he described as a teenager he had been part of a far-right organisation who picked on Asian young and elderly. During his childhood he had grown up on a Glasgow estate where your 'Orange' or 'Green' identity was formed. Then after moving to East Lancashire, 'Orange' and 'Green' became 'White' and 'Black' (or Asian). Then and us, all over again. He urged his daughter not to fall into the traps he fell into when young. Is this irony? History repeating itself? Can you justifiably be racist if someone of a different race has discriminated against you?

A recent TV programme investigating far-right activity in the UK interviewed a self-confessed white supremacist, who managed to forget his racist views temporarily when he was secretly filmed dating a Black mixed-race woman. Why did he do this? "We had your women before you had ours!". The relationship between sex and race goes back a long, long way. Are men more racist than women? Are they racist in different ways?

"My English Granddad fought to keep this country British!". Well so did Jewish Granddads in the trenches of the Somme, Arab (even Palestinian) Granddads in the Battle of Britain and Indian Granddads around the world where Britain was attacking or being attacked. All these different races fought to keep this country British – my own forebears gave their lives for the British in World War 1 & World War 2.

So how racist is Britain? There is a tiny minority who would meet the requirements for being an out-and-out racist but a better question would be: is the British system racist? The judicial and policing system, the health & social care system, the governing & political system, the education system, the media and public information system are to some extent because policies and procedures if not sufficiently robust can be abused by some. Following Stephen Lawrence's murder, Macpherson's Report made famous the term 'institutional racism'. I see institutional discrimination on a regular basis – not all is intentional but it's effects can be much more hurtful than verbal or even some physical racism. Two faith groups, Jews and Sikhs, were recognised as races so were covered by legislation in the Race Relations Act but Muslims weren't (or Hindus and other faiths for that matter). We do need a level playing field to stop the generalisations such as Robert Kilroy-Silk's previous remarks.

How do we combat racism? Hmmm ... tough one! It's difficult to do in a co-ordinated approach, that's why the Commission for Racial Equality and other such organisations will always be limited in what they can achieve. Changing hearts and minds isn't tangible. Some faith groups / races have their own methods for tackling hate and discrimination against them. Propaganda, lobbying (government) decision-makers and media presence will offer protection from media demonisation and workplace discrimination but will it change the clichéd 'hearts and minds'?

For Christians and other people of faith, coveting your neighbours wife, dishonouring your parents, hoarding wealth, etc are not really illegal in this country but upholding racist practices and discriminating because of someone's race, ethnic origin or faith are. Or so we're told.

A Scottish Perspective on Racism Mona McAllinden

I'm originally from Glasgow and I now live and study journalism in the city. When I was 6 my family moved to a small town in East Ayrshire.

I am of mixed race (Egyptian and Scottish) but live with white parents. I suffered racial abuse when I was in both primary and secondary school, although more so at primary school as I was not yet confident enough to stick up for myself.

I think one of the main factors of racial abuse in a small town is undoubtedly ignorance. There were no black people living in my town and only two Asian families, so I felt as though I stuck out like a sore thumb.

Obviously you can't force ethnic minorities to move to small towns merely to combat ignorance but there must be some way of making people of colour more familiar to small town residents, so that they're not regarded as peculiarities.

Maybe people who have suffered abuse at the hands of racists could visit primary schools and other youth centres to talk about their experiences - so kids can see that people from ethnic minorities are just normal people, the same as them.

Maybe then the small town mentality may gradually dissipate and ethnic minorities may not be as isolated in towns like mine.