
Time for Humanity to Reckon with Itself

by Shaykh Faïd Muhammad Saïd

In the midst of a global pandemic in which the ‘silent killer’, Coronavirus disease, has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, humanity finds itself grappling with another pandemic, one that refuses to be eradicated and has grown louder and, in so many ways, more lethal than the microbe for which there is still no proven vaccine.

Turmoil, violence, soul-searching and counter-arguments have followed the recent events, ignited by the killing of George Floyd, the Black man suffocated by a white police officer in Minneapolis, USA, in May 2020. The death has resulted in flashpoints of protest across Europe and is symptomatic of the fact that racism today is real and is by no means a uniquely American issue.

Hundreds of thousands globally have, paradoxically, ignored global quarantine regulations to mobilise in support of equality and calls for justice—against violence, against systemic racial inequality, against historic grievances and implicit bias—in cities across the world.

Each cause and demand deserves a full analysis of its own, while overlapping and sometimes competing perspectives attempt to explain these grievances.

The knots that tie these grievances are to do with numerous structural elements of our society that have been established over our history. This much is undeniable and universally acknowledged. These acknowledgements range from genuine apologies and affirmations of support to panicked revocations that have invited counter-protests.

The issues at the heart of our current situation—accepted and practised everyday racism—will not disappear through rage-filled destruction, but only when our selves are reckoned with.

Is there potential for hope when it is claimed that we cannot fix systems that are not working or not fit-for-purpose due to historic evolution? Are there imaginative solutions when it is claimed that the contemporary turmoil is the result of absent leadership at the level of the state, institutions and organisations?

The task is huge and requires sincere joint efforts, not least because of the demands for racial equality and an end to racial oppression speak to notions of human rights, civil rights and cultural traditions. Our backgrounds and experiences make us who we are and determine why it is imperative to find common ground for a real conversation about race.

We cannot—as proven by ongoing events—achieve equality, peaceful coexistence, social accommodations and political settlements unless we sincerely believe in the oneness of humanity. The Islamic tradition is fundamentally at one with secular traditions in proclaiming the universality of humankind. It valorises the centrality of benevolent justice and cooperation between all humans, and its Prophets and sages have, from the dawn of mankind, warned against intolerance and discrimination in all its forms, not least racial. Differences of culture, language and national affiliation, as well as preservation of heritage and tradition, are all accepted as contingent on time and place. At the same time, Islamic



The ruins of Miqat al-Juhfa, Saudi Arabia—the stopping point for pilgrims from the north and west to enter ihram.

tradition censures racism and those tendencies that promote intolerance and animosity and generate cycles of violence.

Unfortunately, there has probably never been a time in history when humanity has not witnessed racial prejudice burning in a corner of the world—fuelling hatred and chauvinism—stemming from claims of supremacy. All too often, that supremacy is attained, or seen as attainable, by violence and subjugation of an Other—whether imagined or realised through propaganda.

Racism and intolerance have claimed the lives of millions of people in globe-spanning wars and are ongoing in many parts of the world to this day: wars fought over resources that continue to shrink even as consumption increases with concomitant harm to the planet's ecosystems.

Accordingly, divine scripture cautions humanity against straying: “*Should He not know what He created? And He is the Subtle, All-Aware*”.¹ Diversity and difference, then, is a sign, not an aberration of Divine will: “*Had God so willed, He could have made you all one entity, but He allows whom He will to go astray and guides whom He will, and ye will indeed be asked of what ye used to do*”.²

Within Muslim communities, of course, many supposed adherents have pursued and continue to pursue actions that are contrary to the tenets of Islam. Needless to say, the actions of an extremist minority have done much to tarnish the reputation of

the majority who accept the studied literature of Islam and its fountainhead, the Prophet Muhammad, as the authentic and incorruptible representation of Islam in all aspects of universal humanity.

And indeed, in the heroic figure and in the assertion of the Prophet as the “*master of mankind*”—understood as the authentic exemplar—Muslims simultaneously acknowledge and confess the contrary tendencies of intolerance and racial discrimination that Muslims both propagate and are subjected to. The whole world, not least Muslims who claim the Prophet as the true exemplar, urgently needs to rediscover and reclaim the true principles of Islam that reject discrimination in all forms and embrace tolerance and universality of humankind. For Muslims, certainly, it entails rediscovery and reclamation from iconoclasts and opportunists (those outside of the ‘fold’ of Islam), a moment to reappraise and embrace universal values in the service of imaginative solutions to the contemporary crises.

It was such an embrace of universal humanity and civil rights that empowered the disadvantaged to gain equal rights and shared spaces in which to prosper. We know from the Hadith literature about Salim, Mawla Abu Hudaifah, a freed slave, and his rise to prominence, which is all the more enlightening in the context of sixth-century Arabia. A Persian captive sold into slavery as a young boy, Salim wound up in Makkah where he was freed and adopted by Abu Hudaifah, an elder of Makkah’s stratified society.

¹ Surat Al-Mulk: 14

² Surat Al-Nahl: 93



Photo by Peter Sanders, see bio on “Sanders, Peter” on page 204

Whenever challenged about his origins, Salim would respond that he did not know his father’s name. In the culture of patronymic lineage, he was variously referred to as “Salim the son of Abu Hudhaifah” and as “Salim the former slave of Abu Hudaifah”. This latter epithet was by no means derogatory as one might assume, viewed from a twenty-first-century perspective. Rather, it signified and valorised his new-found prominence, a slave and an outsider who was now the adopted son of a leading Makkan. Such was the transformation of Arabia’s Muslim community with the advent of Islam, that Salim was the first to lead congregational prayers in Madinah in an early phase of migration. The Prophet, still holding out in his native Makkah, had not then made his own migration to Madinah. The new immigrant community from Makkah then being warmly received and quartered among the Madinans included among its ranks Umar ibn al-Khattab, the future second Caliph of Islam. A scholarly Makkan prince in his own right, Umar had no qualms about being led by a former slave, an outsider who could not even attest the name of his biological father. A detailed and studied depth is important here: Salim leading the prayer was not merely a contingency whereby the pious stepped aside for one individual. Umar’s presence alone demonstrates it was more than a pious thought: it was previously unthinkable that a youth—a freed slave and an adopted one at that—would be put forward ahead of his father. Seniority was everything in

Arabian society. Numerous strands: race, social status and heredity, are here eroded in the layered story of Salim. And we would still not fully grasp the immensity of Salim’s role—and the implications for social cohesion—if we think in terms of facile assumptions about “the imam at the mosque”. In the context of the nascent Muslim community in Madinah, in the Prophet’s absence, Salim Mawla Abu Hudaifah’s role as prayer-leader effectively made him deputy leader of the senate assembly. Such is the transformative power of a sincere embrace of racial equality and ideas of assimilation and social cohesion.

The equality of humankind is central to Islam, and all other principles flow from it: spiritual notions of ‘piety’ and ‘integrity’ are none other than moral uprightness and earnest loyalty, the terms by which we judge social relations and civic responsibilities in modern societies. Thus the Qur’an states: *“O mankind! Behold! We have created you from male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct.”*³

And in his famous farewell speech the Prophet declared: *“O people, indeed your Lord is one, and you are born of one [biological] father. In truth, there is no virtue of Arab over the non-Arab and non-Arab over the Arab, or white over black or black over white, except in piety [...]”*⁴

Islam, then, understood in its authentic interpretations, elevates the importance of the human

3 Surat Al-Hujuraat: 13

4 Musnad Ahmed: 22978

being without differentiating by religion, colour or race. The Qur'an puts heavy stress on this over and over, for example: *"Indeed We have honoured the children of Adam. We carry them over land and sea and have made provision of good things for them, and have elevated them above many of those whom We created with distinction."*⁵

And let us remember that those who may or may not have been adversaries are nonetheless deserving of respect, of common decency and dignity. Hence, the Prophet stood up as a gesture of respect when a Jewish funeral bier passed in his presence; when questioned about doing so, he said: *"Is it not a human soul?"*⁶ Within Islam, of course, there is no greater precept concerning race relations than in the Prophet's choice of Bilaal, an Abyssinian, as his muezzin, a supreme expression of the divine declaration, *"The noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct."*⁷ In stark terms, the muezzin's role in a Muslim community is to sound the call to prayer. But in spiritual terms, the muezzin is far from being a mere functionary, for the Prophet, said *"muezzins will have longer necks on the Day of Resurrection,"*⁸ meaning they will *"stand tall in the first rank of humanity"*; one might say the nobility referred to in the Hadith quite easily implies anyone who *"enjoins all that is good and calls to success."*

Islam is, in fact, unequivocal about postures of racial superiority, and this is primarily due to that *"masterly way"* of the Prophet that Muslims praise in hymn and pious invocation but have not necessarily absorbed. The Prophet, ever quick to set an example and show the superior way, untangled the knots of racial, tribal and ethnic divisions whenever he encountered them. Thus, when Abu Dhar insulted Bilaal in racial terms, he was severely reprimanded by the Prophet: *"You still have the traces of the [era of] ignorance, Abu Dhar!"*⁹ Abu Dhar, of the Ghifar tribe, was a *"Companion"*, one of the generation revered as the Prophet's contemporaries and close associates who helped disseminate the Divine Message. He was also human. He was not infallible but he was, like all of the Companions, quick to mend his ways and make amends. In the same vein, disagreement between the Madinan Ansars and the Muhajir Makkans escalated

from a war of words that alluded to tribal differences and almost resulted in armed conflict. The Prophet, accompanied by a group of Makkkan immigrants, approached the contending parties and reminded them, *"And you are Muslims! Dear God! Dare you propagate ignorance when I am among you? And this after God guided you to Islam, honoured you by rooting out prejudices, saved you from darkness and united you! Then will you turn back to your ignorant old ways?"*¹⁰

The Ansar and the Muhajirin duly embraced, embarrassed by their lapse, the collective shame heightened by the fact of the Prophet's role as peacemaker. The Prophet, after all, was a Muhajir; the Muhajir, after all, had found refuge and security in Madinah. Far from taking sides, let alone favouring his fellow Makkans, the Prophet maintained social cohesion by reminding all of the collective honour and the higher, noble values.

The Prophet, of course, was in lockstep with scriptural exhortations concerning racial division and ethnic or tribal discord: Thus, according to Jubayr ibn Mutam, the Prophet said: *"He who calls towards tribalism is not from amongst us, he who fights for tribalism is not from amongst us, and he who dies upon tribalism is not from amongst us."*¹¹

The Prophet would no longer merely discourage or rebuke as he had done with Aws and Khazraj or Abu Dhar: he had drawn a thick double-red line.

Accordingly, God says: *"If ye obey him, ye will be guided aright."*¹²

To follow the Prophet, then, is to follow that masterly way, the all-inclusive way.

And the all-inclusive way is none other than God's Way. In the Hadith Qudsi, or Divine Hadith that sit between collected Revelation and collected Hadith-Sayings, Abu Dharr – the Ghiffarian previously censured—narrates from the Prophet that God says: *"O My servants! I have forbidden oppression for Myself, and so I have made it forbidden amongst you, so do not oppress one another. O My servants! All of you are astray except those whom I have guided, so seek guidance from Me and I shall guide you. O My servants! All of you are hungry except those whom I sustain, so seek sustenance from Me and I shall sustain you. O My servants, all of you are naked except those whom I*

5 Surat Al-Israa: 70

6 Saheeh Muslim: 961

7 Surat Al-Hujuraat: 13

8 Saheeh Muslim: 387

9 Saheeh Muslim: 1661

10 Saheeh Al-Bukhari: 3518

11 Sunan Abu Dawud: 5121

12 Surat An-Noor: 54

have clothed, so seek to be adorned by Me and I shall adorn you. O My servants! You commit sins by day and by night, and I forgive all sins, so seek forgiveness from Me and I shall forgive you. O My servants! You will not attain harming Me so as to harm me, and you will not attain benefitting Me so as to benefit Me. O My servants! If the first of you and the last of you, and the humans of you and the jinn of you, were all as pious as the most pious heart of any individual amongst you, then this would not increase My Kingdom an iota. O My servants! If the first of you and the last of you, and the humans of you and the jinn of you, were all as wicked as the wickedest heart of any individual amongst you,

then this would not decrease My Kingdom an iota. O My servants! If the first of you and the last of you, and the humans of you and the jinn of you, were all to stand together in one place and ask of Me, and I were to grant all their request, then that would not decrease what I possess, except what is decreased of the ocean when a needle is dipped into it.”¹³

It is time to challenge ourselves to look both inward and outward in order to channel our despair and rage into a commitment to work together towards equality, tolerance and social cohesion in the path of God, who is the Lord of us all.

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13 Saheeh Muslim: 2577