

HOW TO ACHIEVE RACIAL EQUALITY

By Shaykhul-Ḥadīth, Ḥaḍrat Mawlānā
Muhammad Saleem Dhorat ḥafīzahullāh

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

More than half a century after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the historic sacrifices of the US civil rights movement, the world is still witnessing a global outrage at the levels of institutional racism that persist in society. In an era when the concept of human rights is widely advocated, especially in the west, incidents of racial injustice still hit the headlines. The recent murder of an African American in the US is one such example.

Citizens of the countries that make the loudest claims to be the champions of human rights spilled out onto the streets, and their political leaders, by and large, acknowledged that their cause was just. At a time when restrictions were in place limiting public gatherings due to the Coronavirus pandemic, protesters were prepared to put their lives at risk by coming out onto the streets to demonstrate in large numbers. Their actions cried out to the world that the scourge of racism is more of a threat than the Coronavirus. After so many years of having regulations in place to protect human rights and establishing so many human rights organisations, why is the issue of racism and civil rights still unresolved? The simple answer is that even in this so-called progressive

era, prejudice and racial superiority have still not left the hearts and minds of people.

On the whole, we find that human rights are only observed due to the rule of law, as opposed to being a core human value. We witness that where human rights can be violated without fear of legal repercussions, only few have the decency to uphold them. In countries where the rule of law is weak, the vulnerable in society like the poor and racial minorities are oppressed. The laws that were meant to protect them are compromised by those with wealth and influence, who are able to secure immunity from accountability.

Laws and charters definitely have their place in establishing justice, but they can only ever hope to treat the symptoms of racism and inequality, not the root cause, which is a sickness of the heart. Muḥammad ﷺ, the Messenger of Allāh ﷻ, achieved what today seems unachievable, and he did so in a short span of only 23 years. He founded a society where every life mattered and every individual was equally precious: black or white, male or female, adult or child, able-bodied or disabled, rich or poor. This is because, along with stipulating rights and laying out principles of equality, he purified the hearts and removed the filth of prejudice from them.

The attention he gave to this purification and its results can be demonstrated by an incident involving two of his companions, Sayyidunā Bilāl ؓ and Sayyidunā Abū Dharr ؓ. Once when Sayyidunā Abū Dharr ؓ, an Arab of a noble tribe, referred to Sayyidunā Bilāl ؓ, an Abyssinian, as the son of a black woman, Nabī ؑ became displeased and admonished him. Sayyidunā Abū Dharr ؓ, upon realising his error, was so remorseful that he threw himself to the ground and swore that he would not rise until Sayyidunā Bilāl ؓ had placed his foot on his head.

Incidentally, an Abyssinian of relatively low social standing, feeling free to complain about an indigenous Arab testifies to how successful Rasūlullāh ﷺ was in nurturing equality in society. Furthermore, the incident shows that a humble member of society felt he could approach the highest authority in the land, without fear of rejection or censure.

Sayyidunā Anas ؓ recounts another incident of how an ordinary citizen confidently brought his case in front of the leader of the day. Sayyidunā ‘Amr ibnul-‘Āṣ ؓ was an Arab and had been appointed governor of Egypt. His son had a horse race with a man of Egyptian descent, and the Egyptian won. Sayyidunā ‘Amr’s ؓ son set about flogging the poor Egyptian with his whip, exclaiming that he was a member of a noble family. The

victim sought refuge in the court of Amīrul Mu'minīn 'Umar رضي الله عنه. Sayyidunā 'Umar رضي الله عنه summoned Sayyidunā 'Amr ibnul-'Āṣ رضي الله عنه and his son, and the Egyptian was given justice.

Sayyidunā 'Umar رضي الله عنه then went on to rebuke Sayyidunā 'Amr رضي الله عنه, even though he had been unaware of the incident and the victim had not brought the complaint to him. Sayyidunā 'Umar رضي الله عنه criticised him for being remiss in ensuring that prejudice did not take root in his son's heart. The statement he made is as relevant to today's struggle for racial equality as it was on that occasion. He said: "Since when have you started regarding people as slaves when (in actual fact) their mothers gave birth to them as free men?"

Division and segregation exist in society because barriers exist in the hearts. Only a strategy that concentrates on the heart can successfully bring them down. This is what Rasūlullāh ﷺ did. He demolished the idol of racial superiority that dwelt in the hearts just as he demolished the physical idols of stone that distanced man from his Creator.

The day of the Liberation of Makkah in 8 AH (630 CE) marked the end of the era of oppression suffered by the early Muslims. That historic day also witnessed the same Abyssinian, Sayyidunā Bilāl رضي الله عنه, being asked to

stand on the roof of the sacred Ka‘bah to give the call to prayer. Granting a position of such honour to a black man sent a clear message to the masses that just as the sacred Ka‘bah had been newly cleansed of the hundreds of idols that previously resided in it, the hearts of men must also be cleansed of the idol of racial superiority and bigotry. On that occasion, Allāh ﷻ revealed the verse of the Glorious Qur’ān:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاهُ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ
شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا، إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاهُ،
إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O Mankind! We have created you from a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes so that you may recognise one another; truly, the most noble among you in the sight of Allāh are the most pious among you; indeed, Allāh is the All-Knowing, the All-Seeing. (49:13)

Two years later, during the farewell hajj, Rasūlullāh ﷺ declared:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ، أَلَا إِنَّ رَبَّكُمْ وَاحِدٌ وَإِنَّ أَبَاكُمْ وَاحِدٌ، أَلَا لَا
فَضْلَ لِعَرَبِيٍّ عَلَىٰ عَجَمِيٍّ وَلَا لِعَجَمِيٍّ عَلَىٰ عَرَبِيٍّ، وَلَا أَحْمَرَ
عَلَىٰ أَسْوَدَ وَلَا أَسْوَدَ عَلَىٰ أَحْمَرَ إِلَّا بِالتَّقْوَىٰ

O people! Listen attentively! Indeed, your Rabb is One and indeed your father [Ādam ﷺ] is one. Listen attentively! An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; a white person has no superiority over a black person, nor does a black person have any superiority over a white person, except by virtue of taqwā. (Aḥmad)

The only criterion of superiority is taqwā, i.e. the level of God-consciousness in a person. The greater a person's level of taqwā, the more sincere and genuine are his actions and attributes, and the higher is his level of virtue and merit. In the Hereafter, people will be judged on this merit, not on race, wealth or anything else.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَنْظُرُ إِلَى صُورِكُمْ وَأَمْوَالِكُمْ، وَلَكِنْ يَنْظُرُ إِلَى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَأَعْمَالِكُمْ

Indeed, Allāh does not look at your physical forms and appearances, but looks at your hearts and your actions. (Muslim)

مَنْ بَطَأَ بِهِ عَمَلُهُ، لَمْ يُسْرِعْ بِهِ نَسَبُهُ

The one who is held back (from the status of the righteous) by his (deficient) actions will not be fast-tracked (to their status) by his (high) lineage. (Muslim)

The society that Rasūlullāh ﷺ created was one where the fundamental truth of human equality was ingrained in the hearts and minds. The physical characteristics, appearances and worldly circumstances of an individual did not distract one from recognising the merits of the individual. Race, wealth and worldly status were no longer an impediment to being an equal member of society. Whenever the eyes of a white person fell on a black face, those eyes noticed the merit of the individual, not the colour. By transforming the hearts, the Messenger of Mercy ﷺ transformed society and provided the real cure for racism.

Thus, as well as laying out comprehensive rights and obligations for all members of society, Islām also works at the level of the heart and purifies it of negative traits which enables and empowers man to fulfil the rights and obligations of society. Both of these are essential today if the world wishes to witness true equality, where every life matters.

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Islāmic Da‘wah Academy

120 Melbourne Road • Leicester • UK • LE2 0DS

Tel / Fax: 0116 262 5440

www.idauk.org • e-mail: info@idauk.org