

WHY #BlackLivesMatter

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"The personal is political." This is a statement ordinarily uttered by lecturers as they introduce first year Politics students to the world of political and identity studies. However, the truth is that the personal, and indeed, the political, permeates the religious and spiritual realm.

“As with the first Hijra to Africa, one cannot imagine that it was coincidental that the Prophet ﷺ instructed Bilal to climb the holiest of places, the Ka’ba, to place his black feet on top of the Ka’ba, and to call out the Athaan in a society that then had disregard for black life”

When we speak of our beloved Prophet ﷺ and recount his many military expeditions in the position of leader – it is easy for us to understand how that was both spiritual and political. Indeed, we admire our Prophet ﷺ for his dexterous handling of the religious detractors in *Makkah*, even after he migrated to *Madinah*. We retell with pride the battle of *Badr*, with the combination of divine guidance, military strategy and cunning that brought about the ultimate victory. Even as we engage in this discourse, it is clear that all this political manoeuvring was done with divine guidance and always placed within the context of the spiritual furthering of our beautiful religion.

It is peculiar then, that for quite some time, we as a community have largely struggled with extending our collective mental capacity and resulting discourse on the

presence of black bodies – and by extension the continent of Africa – within the dominant paradigm of our religious history. In dominant discourse the presence of Africa as a geographical setting, where history played out, is rarely emphasised for the political impact that it had and still has – we need to question honestly, why that is? Africa was – and still is – a destination of safety, and welcome for Muslims who are largely persecuted elsewhere. This was attested to by the Prophet ﷺ selecting Africa as the first destination for the migration of the early Muslims. We rarely engage in intellectual introspection as to why the Prophet ﷺ selected Ethiopia for the first *Hijra*. The truth is the Prophet ﷺ saw great potential in Africa and its people.

After the battle of *Badr*, the *Quraish* were desperate for some form of victory over the Muslims. They decided to send Amr bin Al Aas to head up a delegation to address King Najashi of Ethiopia, to return those early Muslims to *Makkah*. As part of their strategy, Amr gave every general as well as Najashi a gift, so that they may be influenced, or as we would say in a South African context, ‘captured’. Amr further exclaimed “I swear by Allah that tomorrow I shall definitely defame the Muslims so much that they will be uprooted”. Abdullah bin Rabee pleaded with Amr not to do so because they were, after all, related. So, Amr agreed, but to paint a bad picture of the Muslims, Amr, said:

و الله لاخبرته انهم يزعمون ان عيسي بن مريم عبد

Wait until Najashi hears that these Muslims claim Isa ﷺ is only the slave of Allah. And so, when Najashi summoned the Muslims

they were rightfully anxious about the inevitable question regarding Isa ﷺ. Despite their anxiety, they resolved and said:

نقول والله فيه ما قال الله وما جاءنا به نبينا

“By Allah, we shall say but what Allah has said about him and what our Prophet ﷺ has brought [regardless of what the consequences are]”. When Najashi asked them about Isa ﷺ they said “he is the slave of Allah, His Prophet ﷺ, the spirit that Allah created and His word cast on the chaste virgin Mariam”. When Najashi heard this, he said: “By Allah even Isa ﷺ would not add to what you have said the extent of this stick.” This statement of course infuriated the Christian priests around Najashi, to whom he said:

فوالله ما اخذ الله مني الرشوة حين رد علي ملكي

“When Allah restored my kingdom to me, He took no bribes”. Why should I then accept bribes? Africa was a land of truth, and indeed safety and refuge for Muslims. Where truth was spoken and accepted by its leader and he was not influenced nor captured by greed. It is then concerning, as Islam spreads through our communities, that we have not reciprocated the hospitality Africa once afforded us, nor have we empowered black people to assume leadership within our communities.

The presence of individual black bodies in our religious histories rarely goes further than Bilal (*Radhia Allahu Anhu*). Even so, we must acknowledge that Bilal’s proximity to our Prophet ﷺ was deliberate and purposeful and not a random instance of ‘I don’t see colour’.

In fact, the Prophet ﷺ was aware of the black suffrage that existed before Islam and the prejudice, which black people faced in Arabia and other parts of the world. He actively attempted to correct this. As with the first *Hijra* to Africa, one cannot imagine that it was coincidental that the Prophet ﷺ instructed Bilal to climb the holiest of places, the Ka'ba, to place his black feet on top of the Ka'ba, and to call out the *Athaan* in a society that then had disregard for black life. In fact, if one studies the Prophetic narrations that deal or engage with racism, it reveals that the Prophet ﷺ was aware of black suffrage. He acknowledged the black experience and engaged his community, the Companions, by changing that experience and advancing the plight of the black man. In his final sermon, the Prophet ﷺ embedded in the minds of the Companions :

لا فضل لعربي على عجمي، ولا لعجمي على
عربي، ولا لأبيض على أسود، ولا لأسود على
أبيض إلا بالتقى

An Arab is not better than a non-Arab nor vice versa, nor is a white man better than a black man nor vice versa except through *Taqwa*. In that order, aware of black suffrage the Prophet ﷺ dealt with perceived white supremacy.

After the Prophet's ﷺ mother passed away, being orphaned, Umu Ayman (*Radhia Allahu Anhu*), a black woman raised the Prophet ﷺ as her own. The Prophet ﷺ would say *Ya Umm Ayman! Ya Ummi!* (O Umm Ayman! O my mother!). The Prophet ﷺ was a son of a black woman, and his upbringing under Umm Ayman would inform his relations with other black people. It is this Prophetic tradition that must inform our relationship

and engagement with #BlackLivesMatter.

Through a number of Prophetic narrations, we learn that the Prophet ﷺ used the word *Jahiliyah* (the pre-Islamic era or conversion to Islam) to describe racism, as it is so disgusting and revolting that the idea of its existence when one had come out of *Jahiliyah* into Islam is incomprehensible.

There is not a day that goes by that black people in this country, on this continent, and indeed in this world, are not made to suffer racism. What claim do we have to the Prophet ﷺ when we do nothing to protect and advance the lives of black people when our Prophet ﷺ was raised by a black woman? For this reason, #BlackLivesMatter.

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