



TALK TOOLKIT — Delivering Khutbahs with Purpose

Understanding and Combating Racism in the Muslim Community

YAQVEEN[™]
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH



KHUTBAH

Racism In Our Ranks

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

A man walked into his home to see his 8-year-old daughter violently combing her hair. When he asked her what was wrong, she said: “I want my hair to be straight.” When he asked why, she replied with the following: “When my friend introduced me to another one of her friends, she immediately told her not to play with me. When she asked why, she mentioned: ‘She’s dirty’ because of my skin.” This incident affected her until her late teens.

Another man sorrowfully mentioned to his African-American friend: “One thing that I learned while studying and dealing with black people is that they *actually are* smart people; not just sports figures and rap stars.”

Brother and sisters, imagine the Imam at *jumu‘ah* today requested that only African-American, or only Indopak, or only Arab, Muslims attend this *masjid*; would that not make your blood boil? It should, because we all know racism has no place in Islam, and Islam outdid everyone in propelling racial equality. We all know our Prophet (ﷺ) said in his Farewell Sermon, **“You are all from Adam, and Adam is from dust. There is no virtue for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab, nor for a white person over a black person, nor for a black person over a white person, except by righteousness”** [at-Tirmidhi]. But what if I told you that Muslims do in fact announce this in their *masājid*? It may not happen verbally or on the loudspeakers, but through our behaving in ways that cause this to be understood. For instance, when a group at the *masjid* is disproportionately represented in its programs or leadership or menu, a sense of alienation usually brews amongst the rest; a feeling that *I am not as welcome here as others*.

Does this feeling sometimes exist between us Muslims? Absolutely. According to an ISPU poll, Black Muslims are just as likely to experience racism from their own faith community as Black Americans are from their own faith communities (i.e. other Christians), with both groups more likely to report experiencing racial discrimination from the general public. We should remember that in 2017, 60% of American Muslims reported some level of religious discrimination within the past year and that most non-white Muslims described experiencing some sort of racial discrimination in that same year. Imagine that atop all these offenses, Black Muslims, who represent 1/3 of the Muslims in America, also experience such treatment from their fellow Muslims. That should alarm us, because *masājid* are meant to be sanctuaries that protect us from forgetting Allah, and from forgetting our equality in front of Him. As our Prophet (ﷺ) said in that same Farewell Sermon, **“O people, be certain that Your Lord is One and your father is one”** [Ahmad].

Along with remembering that our father Adam is one, remember that Adam (ra) was denied the right Allah gave him - *sujūd* (prostration) - by the first racist: Shaytan. When Allah said, **“What prevented you from prostrating when I commanded you?”** Shaytan said, **“I am better than him; You created me from fire and created him from clay.”** Allah said, **“Then get down from it (Paradise), for you have no right to be arrogant here. So get out; you are truly one of the disgraced”** [al-A‘raf 7:12-13].

قَالَ مَا مَنَعَكَ إِلَّا تَسْجُدَ إِذْ أَمَرْتُكَ^ط قَالَ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِنْهُ خَلَقْتَنِي مِنْ نَّارٍ وَخَلَقْتَهُ مِنْ طِينٍ (12) قَالَ فَاهْبِطْ مِنْهَا
فَمَا يَكُونُ لَكَ أَنْ تَتَّكِبَ فِيهَا فَانْحُرْ إِنَّكَ مِنَ الصَّاغِرِينَ (13)

Isn't that insane? Shaytan cited how Allah created Adam (i.e. his physical characteristics) as a basis for defying Allah. This also reminds us that arrogance lies at the heart of racism.

What is Racism?

Many times we do not realize that, on some undetected level, a degree of racism dwells inside us, so let us first define racism. Racism is the biased belief or idea that people of certain races and/or skin complexions are inherently superior to others. Usually, we **inherit**, without realizing, these biased notions from our families, friends, neighbors, and how different racial groups are portrayed in public discourse and the media. These biases happen on two major levels:

1. Explicit Bias: thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that a person holds **consciously**, like someone who openly asserts that certain races are more athletic and less intelligent, or more likely to commit a crime simply because of their skin color.
2. Implicit Bias: thoughts, feelings, and beliefs a person holds **subconsciously** and does not realize are there, like someone who is skeptical of Islamic scholarship from a non-Arab or non-Desi, or who considers American-born converts to Islam less authentically Muslim.

We as Muslim communities need to be brave enough to identify our many biases, especially when we are the most diverse faith group in America. That beautiful fact also poses a unique challenge: are we going to live up to the racial equality ideal in Islam, or be plagued by the disease of arrogance - and by extension, racism - that holds back our societies? We will either embrace the jihad of burying our arrogance or be humiliated and severed from Allah just as Shaytan was; **“Then get down from it (Paradise), for you have no right to be arrogant here. So get out; you are truly one of the disgraced”** [al-A‘raf 7:12-13].

As the Prophet (ﷺ) said, **“Nobody with a speck of arrogance in his heart will enter Paradise.”** Then he defined it, saying, **“Arrogance is the rejection of truth, and belittlement of people”** [Muslim].

لَا يَدْخُلُ الْجَنَّةَ مَنْ كَانَ فِي قَلْبِهِ مِثْقَالُ ذَرَّةٍ مِنْ كِبَرٍ... الْكِبَرُ بَطْرُ الْحَقِّ، وَغَمَطُ النَّاسِ

Do Not Be Dismissive

We all agree that it is wrong to make people feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in the *masjid*. At the same time, some of you may be thinking that it is only natural for us to gravitate towards those most like me; I do not see the others as inferior, nor am I deliberately trying to marginalize anyone or make them feel left out. I believe you, but I want you to remember two things:

- Islam teaches us to discomfort ourselves if our comfort is hurtful to others. As the Prophet (ﷺ) said, **“Whenever you are three people, let no two speak secretly while excluding the third - for that saddens him”** [al-Bukhari & Muslim].

إِذَا كُنْتُمْ ثَلَاثَةً فَلَا يَتَنَاجَى اثْنَانِ دُونَ الثَّلَاثِ ، إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ ، فَإِنَّ ذَلِكَ يُحْزِنُهُ

We need to be more sensitive. We need to be more accommodating. We need to realize that someone feeling like they do not belong in this *masjid*, especially nowadays, usually means they feel like they do not belong in this religion.

- We cannot just casually dismiss the possibility of racism in our midst. It may not be all of us, and it may not be the primary reason *masjid*-goers feel unwelcome, but be sure it does exist in us and is part of our problem. Why? Our Prophet (ﷺ) said, **“Four aspects of jāhiliyya in my ummah they will never [fully] abandon: bragging about status, insulting [others’] ancestry, seeking rain through the stars, and wailing [in tragedy]”** [Muslim].

أربعٌ في أمّتي من أمر الجاهليّة لا يتركونهنّ: الفخرُ في الأحساب، والطعنُ في الأنساب،
والاستسقاءُ بالنجوم، والنّياحة

One of the things that will continue resurfacing in this *ummah* will be the tendency to glorify your “elite class”—however you define that. Sometimes it’s by race, skin color, occupation, income bracket—all of which exist in the Muslim community. Therefore, we must constantly be alert to the possibility of racism creeping back into our minds and hearts. Think about it: isn’t the caste system in India a color-based hierarchy that some of us legitimize? Isn’t the word *abd* among Arabs, or *Adon* among Somalis, a word that means slave and is only used in reference to a particular ethnic group? Isn’t the bigoted anti-Islamic language in politics making it quite common for some Muslims to be reactive and make sweeping generalizations about white people?

True Steps Forward

I would like to leave you with concrete suggestions towards repairing the rifts in our community or improving the bonds that are fragile.

1. **Education:** learning about each other, our backgrounds, our experiences, and our struggles. Notice how Allah (swt) said, **“O humanity, We have created you from a single male and female, and made you into communities and tribes in order to get acquainted with each other. Certainly, the most honorable of you with God is the most righteous amongst you”** [al-Hujurat 49:13].

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقَاهُمْ

Ignorance leaves room for misunderstanding, intolerance, and unfair treatment. Knowledge allows us to appreciate Allah’s greatness in creating this diversity, and to appreciate each other as well. For instance, February is recognized in the U.S. as Black History Month; an easy opportunity to listen, learn, and love this unique community and their journey into and within America.

2. **Accommodation:** proactively codify inclusion; this can happen on paper by amending the bylaws on a board level to represent the community’s diversity. It can also happen in programs, such as regularizing a culture night in your local mosque with ethnic foods of the region whose history will be covered in a talk or documentary. It can also happen in practice, by you inviting a wider spectrum of guests to your home or simply approaching community members whose name we never bothered to learn for years.
3. **Purification:** honesty with ourselves, looking inward to examine our hearts, and asking Allah to help us rectify them, is where this must all start. It will grant us the courage to admit to ourselves the ways racism has seeped into our ranks and to hold others accountable when they underestimate its gravity.

It is truly powerful how someone as genuine in faith like Abu Dharr (ra) could slip in anger and hurl a racial slur at Bilal (ra), calling him the “son of a black woman.” When news of this reached the Prophet (ﷺ), he said, **“You are a person in whom is *jahiliyya* (ignorance).”**

إِنَّكَ أَمْرٌ فِيكَ جَاهِلِيَّةٌ

It would have been wrong to downplay this sin in light of Abu Dharr’s esteemed status. It would have also been wrong to call Abu Dharr a racist for it, especially since he did not justify this error but instead rushed to rectify it. How should this speak to us? Firstly, even if we were amongst the Sahaba, we would find that society has stained us with biases about people that take a long time to unlearn. It does not mean we are horrible people, but rather that we have yet to fully rinse away a horrible quality that hides within us. Secondly, we must treat our offenses as a result of these biases extremely seriously, and enact justice immediately after realizing we fell into them.

I pray we can rid our own hearts of the diseases of arrogance and racism, speak out whenever we see these diseases manifested in the words or actions of others, look beyond our own experiences and recognize that the American Muslim narrative includes people of all backgrounds and ethnicities, be brave enough to talk about these issues, and humble enough to stay quiet and really listen when others share their challenges so that we may support one another as a united community.