

# **In The Name of Allah, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful**

## **Islam, Prophet Muhammad, and Blackness**

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### **Introduction**

One of the most puzzling phenomena associated with the spread of Islam in the United States is its tremendous attraction to African Americans. Many students of religion and society are baffled by that attraction, as they understand Islam to be a religion which has prejudiced black people, contributed to the disappearance of indigenous African religions, and aided the development of the slave trade, which ravaged Africa from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Advocates of this interpretation of Islam's relationship to black people or people of African descent are becoming increasingly vociferous.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, despite a far higher conversion rate, a significantly greater percentage of African Americans hold an unfavorable view of Islam, as compared to whites.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore imperative that Muslims clarify just why Islam has proved so attractive to Africans, African Americans, and indeed people of all races and ethnicities.

In this article, we will endeavor to show how Islamic teachings view blackness, and the attitude of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace and Blessing of God be upon him, towards black and African people. We will examine some relevant issues relating to the Arabic language, the personal life of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, and some of the policies he initiated. Hopefully, this article will give insight into some aspects of Islamic teachings that are rarely presented to the English reader, and it will also help towards understanding the continued appeal of Islam to black and African peoples.

This article is not intended to directly address the issue of slavery, nor the glaring institutional racism that has historically characterized many Islamic societies. These issues are highly nuanced and extremely complex. In that sense, they can only be dealt with adequately in an article that concentrates exclusively on them. It is our intention to deal with both issues in a subsequent study. Here we wish to concentrate on the issues outlined above.

### **Language**

Symbols, values, and signification are integral parts of any language. Collectively, these aspects of language provide the culture that nurtures the systematic formation and conveyance of ideas. The ability to systematically form ideas is a precondition for coherent thought. The ability to systematically convey ideas to others is the basis of our associations with them. Our ideas take the form of and are conveyed by words. Words with negative connotations are conducive to the formation of negative thoughts and associations. It is our

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<sup>1</sup> This sort of analysis of Islam's relationship with Africans and black people is one of the pillars of the Afro-centric movement. See, for example, Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. – 2000 AD*, (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987) chs. 5-10.

<sup>2</sup> A poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reveals that 44% of African American respondents held an unfavorable view of Islam, compared to 37% of whites who responded. See Scott Keeter and Burke Olsen, "Views of Islam Remain Sharply Divided." *The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, September 9, 2004, <http://people-press.org/commentary/pdf/96.pdf>.

contention that the negative connotations associated with blackness in the English language help shape the way we think about race here in America.

This is so because the meanings of words are governed by their ability to be exchanged for dissimilar things whose value is to be determined; and their ability to be compared with similar things whose value is to be likewise determined.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the negativity associated with the word “black,” provides a psychological context for ascribing negative values to other things, including people, who are characterized by “blackness.”

To illustrate the negativity associated with blackness in the English language, consider the following meanings of the term “black”, taken from the American Heritage Dictionary:

Evil; sinister; cheerless and depressing; soiled; gloomy, angered; sullen; attended with disaster; calamitous; of or designating a form of humor dealing with the abnormal and grotesque aspects of life and society and evoking a sense of the comedy of human despair and failure; indicating or incurring censure or dishonor.<sup>4</sup>

From these meanings a series of negative phrases are derived. For example: black book, black humor, black list, black market, black measles, black mass, blackmail, black magic, black sheep, and black plague.

The negative connotations associated with blackness were part of the process, which used names, signs, and stereotypes to reinforce ideas of inferiority and superiority in racial and religious relationships here in America and indeed throughout the colonized world. This process, which many scholars refer to as signification, provided a framework for Europeans to enforce ideas of superiority. However, in the racially charged environment of 20<sup>th</sup> Century America, it also provided African Americans who entered into Islam a framework for asserting a non-European cultural and religious identity. Brent Turner, drawing from the research of Charles Long,<sup>5</sup> summarizes the role of signification in the history of African American Muslims in the following passage:

Signification was part of the ambiguous heritage of the Enlightenment. For on the one hand, people of color were categorized, stigmatized, and exploited for the purposes of economic and political hegemonies, but on the other, equalitarianism and the universality of humanity were affirmed by critical Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson and John Locke. The black American community was signified during this period as inferior to the dominant group in America. Since slavery, however, Islam has undercut this signification by offering black Americans the chance to signify themselves, giving them new names and new cultural identities.<sup>6</sup>

One of the reasons Islam proved a source of positive signification is found in its positive view of blackness and black people. We can see this if we look at the meanings associated with black and blackness in Arabic lexical sources.

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Easthope and Kate McGowan, *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992) pp. 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> William Morris, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976) p. 136.

<sup>5</sup> See Charles Long, *Signification, Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Brent Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) p. 3.

Admittedly, the word for black in Arabic, *Aswad*, has some of the negative connotations found in English. Al-Baqir al-'Afif Mukhtar writes, for example:

It has been mentioned that in its symbolic order Arabic Islamic culture standardizes the white color and prejudices the black color. In pre-Islamic poetry, in the Qur'an, in classical Islamic jurisprudence, fiqh, and in classical as well as modern literature, the white color symbolizes beauty, innocence, purity, hope, etc., whereas the black color symbolizes the opposite of these concepts.<sup>7</sup>

Mukhtar's argument is superficial in that he fails to adequately contextualize the meaning of blackness in Arabic and Islamic sources, some of which he quotes, nor does he examine the positive associations, ascriptions, and symbols related to the concept. He cites, by way of illustration, the Qur'anic verse, *On a day some faces will be whitened, and others blackened...*<sup>8</sup> Many commentators mention that this does not refer to physical whitening, for the righteous, nor physical blackening, for the sinners. The great exegete, Abu Su'ud, mentions that the whitening and blackening of the face are allegories for, respectively, the manifestation of great happiness or dejection on the Day of Resurrection.<sup>9</sup> That being the case, even though the "whitening" of the face is identified with a positive referent, great happiness, it is not associated with any racial or ethnic grouping in this world, nor does it have any actual association with a physical color. Therefore, it cannot be viewed as a term that prejudices any human group. In fact, the Prophet Muhammad, Peace and blessing of God upon him, is related as mentioning that on that day in the life hereafter, the faces of black people will be the "whitest."<sup>10</sup>

If one were to interpret the Qur'an in a literal fashion, which is necessary to see it prejudicing a particular group, then the negativity associated with the term "black" and hence its prejudicing black people, would be offset by other verses, such as, *On the day when the trumpet will be blown, we will gather the wrongdoers with blue eyes.*<sup>11</sup> Were one to interpret this verse literally, as I have translated it, one could say that it clearly prejudices northern Europeans, the people most commonly found with blue eyes. The exegetes clearly dismiss such an interpretation, pointing out that blue here is an allegory for eyes that have been afflicted with cataracts, they take on a bluish color and lose their capacity for sight. Thus will be the state of the wrongdoers on the Day of Resurrection.<sup>12</sup> Again, the verse is void of any worldly racial or ethnic associations or ascriptions, as cataracts afflict people of all racial stripes.

Even if one interprets the word "blackening" literally in the above-referenced verse, there are a large number of very positive, non-prejudicial connotations associated with

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<sup>7</sup> Al-Baqir al-'Afif Mukhtar, "The Crisis of Identity in Northern Sudan: A Dilemma of Black People With a White Culture," *CODSRIA African Humanities Institute Northwestern University*, <[www.gurtong.org/ResourceCenter/articles/education/TheCrisisofIdentityinNorthernSudanPres.doc](http://www.gurtong.org/ResourceCenter/articles/education/TheCrisisofIdentityinNorthernSudanPres.doc)>, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Qur'an 3:106-107

<sup>9</sup> Abu Su'ud al-'Imadi, *Irshad al-'Aql as-Salim ila Mazaya al-Kitab al-Karim*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya 199/1419) 2:15.

<sup>10</sup> Imran Hamza Alawiye, *Ibn Jawzi's Apologia on Behalf of the Black People and Their Status in Islam: A Critical Edition and Translation of Kitab T amwir al-Ghabash Fi Fadl 'l-Sudan wa'l Habash*, Diss. University of London, 1985, p. 146. The term "whitest" here means "most illuminated."

<sup>11</sup> Qur'an 20:102

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Abdullah b. Ahmad an-Nasafi, *Madarik at-Tanzil wa Haqa'iq at-Ta'wil*, (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 2000/1421) p. 702.

blackness in the Arabic language. This is an issue Mukhtar and others fail to explore. For example, in most Arabic lexicons, we read that black is simply the opposite of white.<sup>13</sup> Associated meanings include: *Sawad*, literally Blackness, meaning a group of palm, or other trees, so-called because of their lushness; the settled areas around a village or town; a great multitude of people (as-Sawad al'Adham); and great wealth.<sup>14</sup> The two staples of the desert Arab's diet, dates and water, are referred to as the two black things (al-Aswadān).<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that whiteness (Bayad), in some of the contexts mentioned above has negative connotations. For example, as opposed to developed, settled areas referred to by blackness (Sawad), whiteness (Bayad) means deserted, void of life, a wasteland.<sup>16</sup>

The word *sayyid* is from the same root as black or blackness *S-W-D*. That word means, depending on the context, Lord, master, honorable, virtuous, generous, forbearing, one who bears the abuse of his people, leader.<sup>17</sup> In this context, for a person to be called, literally, blacker (Aswadu) than someone else, would mean he is more majestic.<sup>18</sup> An exhaustive examination of this issue would be quite lengthy.

If we turn to religious symbols, we see that these positive connotations of blackness are also present in the theological worldview cultivated by Islam. For example, the *Ka'aba*, the cube-shaped edifice that every Muslim faces during his/her daily prayers is constructed of gray stones. It is honorifically referred to as the House of God (Bayt Allah). It is draped in a black covering –*al-Kiswa*.<sup>19</sup> At that black-cloaked house, the only object we are allowed to kiss, as an act of worship, is a black stone –*al-Hajar al-Aswad*. In the Tradition of Gabriel<sup>20</sup>, when he appeared before the Prophet Muhammad, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, and a group of his followers in the form of a man, of all of the features, which could have been singled out to emphasize his striking beauty, his intensely black hair is mentioned (Shadid Sawad ash-Sha'r). Black hair is celebrated in Arab literature as a sign of beauty and virtue. The black seed (al-Habba as-Sawda') is considered the most beneficial of all medicines, being described as the cure for everything except death.<sup>21</sup>

The color representing the family of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace and Blessing of God upon him, was black. He wore a black turban,<sup>22</sup> a practice widely followed by those claiming descent from him. It is interesting to note that the standard of the Prophet's, Peace be upon him, polity was black while his banner was white.<sup>23</sup> The black standard was the more prominent of the two. The Abbasids, whose revolt was nominally undertaken to

<sup>13</sup> See Ibn Mandhur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, (Beirut: Dar as-Sadr, 2000) pp. 294; and Abu al-Husayn Ahmad b. al-Faris, *Maqayis al-Lughba*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al'Ilmiyya, 1999/1420) 1:576.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Mandhur, pp. 294-296.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn al-Faris, 1:577.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Mandhur, 2:190.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Mandhur, p. 296.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>19</sup> The Ka'aba is now always draped in black. This practice dates back to the beginning of the 'Abbasid Caliphate. However, before that, it was known to have been draped in cloth of various colors.

<sup>20</sup> For the text of the Hadith of Gabriel see Ezzedin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies, trans. *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith*, (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), pp. 28-33.

<sup>21</sup> The text of the tradition in its entirety is, 'Aisha relates that the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, said, "Surely this black seed is a cure for every disease except *as-Sam*." I ['Aisha] said, "What is *as-Sam*?" He said, "Death." See Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari: Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, (Damascus: Dar al-Fayha', 1997/1418) 10:177, #5687.

<sup>22</sup> Muhammad Abu 'Isa at-Tirmidhi, *Ash-Shama'il al-Muhammadiyah*, (Halab, Syria: Maktaba Usama b. Zayd) p. 46.

<sup>23</sup> Imam Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad b. Majah, *As-Sunan*, (Riyadh: Dar as-Salaam, 1999/1420) p. 408, #2818.

establish the political authority of the Prophet's family, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, took the black flag as their standard.

When the Qur'an mentions several colors in juxtaposition, it in no way conveys any negative connotations for black or blackness. God says, *Have you not seen how God sends water from the sky, and We bring forth therewith fruit of diverse colors; and in the mountains are streaks of white and red, of various shades, and [others] intensely black.*<sup>24</sup>

In this verse the beauty and majesty of the lofty mountains are mentioned. Their beauty lies in the rich variation of their colors, and black is one of those beautiful colors. In this verse, it is the only color that is mentioned in emphatic terms [gharabib sud].

Language and symbols provide the basis for our negotiating and understanding reality. As we have attempted to illustrate, Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, provides a context for positive associations with blackness. Being free from the stultifying hindrance of overt or subliminal racial prejudicing, the Qur'anic message can be readily assessed on its merits. It is the message of the Qur'an that attracts people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, along with the loftiness of the prophetic practice. We will now turn to an examination of that practice.

### **The Prophetic Practice**

We wish to introduce in this section of our article, an examination of the prophetic practice as it relates to his attitude towards his black companions, with a glimpse at a few Islamic teachings of relevance for understanding the Islamic position on race. These teachings, when properly understood, work towards eliminating color-based prejudice and racism. We will limit ourselves to a few representative verses from the Qur'an, and a few Prophetic traditions.

God mentions in the Qur'an: *O Mankind! Surely we have created you from a single pair, a male and female. We then made you into nations and tribes that you come to know one another [not that you despise one another]. The most noble of you with God is the most pious.*<sup>25</sup> This verse emphasizes that the values that are meaningful with God are rooted in the content of a person's character, not in any physical features or distinctions. Dividing humanity into nations and tribes facilitates our knowledge of our respective lineages. However, we are discouraged from thinking that those lineages give any of us an intrinsic advantage over another human being. We are reminded that we are all the descendants of Adam, and Adam was created from dirt.<sup>26</sup>

Hence, any virtue is based on those characteristics, which transcend physical accidents and contingencies. The best is the most pious. As piety lies in mindfulness of God, it is a reinforcement of the message conveyed at the beginning of fourth chapter of the Qur'an (Sura an-Nisa') where God, after mentioning the creation of Humanity from a single pair, reminds us, *God is surely watching over you.*<sup>27</sup> Our mindfulness of this fact, and our appropriate responses in light of it are what distinguishes us.

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<sup>24</sup> Al-Qur'an 35:27. The term *gharabib sud* mentioned in this verse can refer to veins of intensely black hue, as I have translated it, or to separate mountains, themselves intensely black in color.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Qur'an 49:13

<sup>26</sup> See Al-Qur'an 3:59. This verse reads, *The similitude of Jesus with God is Adam. He created him (Adam) from dirt, then said to him, "Be!" and he was.*

<sup>27</sup> Al-Qur'an 4:1

It is related that the Prophet, Peace and Blessing of God be upon him, said, “Whoever would be pleased to be the noblest of people, let him be mindful of God.”<sup>28</sup> He also said, “Praise to God who has removed from me the burden and arrogance of pre-Islam. People are of two types. A pious believer who is loved by God, and a wretched profligate who is debased by God.” He then recited this verse (Al-Qur’an 49:13).<sup>29</sup> He also said, “Verily, God does not look at your external forms, nor at your wealth. Rather, he looks at your deeds and your hearts.”<sup>30</sup> Here, the two greatest sources of external differentiation in human societies are eliminated –race, and economic class. Furthermore, two transcendental qualities, righteous deeds and the state of the heart are stressed. The implications of these teachings for human society are profound.

Elsewhere in the Qur’an, God emphasizes that the variation of people’s colors are among His signs, as He says, *Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variation of your languages and complexions. Surely in this are signs for knowledgeable people.*<sup>31</sup> Many of the exegetes mention that the sign in this variation, whose true extent only God knows, is that it all issues from a single parentage.<sup>32</sup> Hence, if we are pleased that God has blessed us with a beautiful hue, we should see that as a glorification of God, not our particular race.

The gist of this discussion is that God never intended physical differences to be the basis of distinctions and prejudicial attitudes between people. In fact, it is Satan who claimed virtue and distinction based on his physical attributes. He says, when ordered to prostrate himself to Adam, *I am better than he. You created me from fire, while you created him from clay.*<sup>33</sup> Satan’s stand here is instructive from another point of view. In addition to his arrogance, his racism is clearly displayed. For the clay that Adam was created from, was black in color – *Hama’in Masnun.*<sup>34</sup> Any racist, Muslim or non-Muslim, should know that he is following the footsteps of Satan in his vile attitudes and practices.

The Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God be upon him, was the best of God’s creation. Hence, his exalted standard of conduct was never the basis for any demeaning attitude or behavior. His attitude towards race and race relations affirms that. This can be illustrated by examining his closest and most beloved companions. Before the practice was forbidden by revelation,<sup>35</sup> The Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, adopted Zayd b. Haritha as his son and appended him to his lineage. He stood at the *Ka’aba* and proclaimed, after Zayd had given preference to him over his very father, “Bear witness that Zayd is my son!”<sup>36</sup> Thereafter he was known as Zayd b. Muhammad. He was nicknamed *Hibbu Rasulillah* (The Beloved of the Messenger of Allah), owing to the tremendous love the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, had for him.

Not only did the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, love Zayd b. Haritha, he trusted him with the command of many of the expeditionary forces which took

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Imam al-Qurtubi in *Al-Jami’ li Ahkam al-Qur’an*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1987/1407) 16:345.

<sup>29</sup> See Imam Suyuti’s commentary on this verse in Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti, *Ad-Durr al-Manthur fi at-Tafsir bi’l Manthur*, (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifa, 1970).

<sup>30</sup> Muhammad b. Yazid b. Majah, *As-Sunan*, (Riyad: Dar as-Salaam, 1420/1999) p. 604, #4143.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Qur’an 30:22

<sup>32</sup> See Muhammad ‘Ali ash-Shawkani, *Fath al-Qadir*, (Beirut: ‘Alam al-Kutub, nd) 4:219.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Qur’an 7:12

<sup>34</sup> The exegetes say that the term *Hama’in Masnun*, refers to “black clay.” See, for example, Abdullah ‘b. Ahmad an-Nasafi, *Madarik at-Tanzil wa’l Haqa’iq at-Ta’wil*, (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifa, 2000/1421) p. 580.

<sup>35</sup> See Al-Qur’an 33:5

<sup>36</sup> This incident is related in brief by Ibn Hisham in his biography of the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him. See Ibn Hisham, *As-Sirah an-Nabawiyya*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1994/1415) 1:213. Ibn Athir relates the incident fully. See Ibn al-Athir, *Usd al-Ghaba fi Ma’rifa as-Sahaba*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya at-Turath al-‘Arabi) 2:282.

the field in the early days of Islam. In fact, Zayd was the most prominent Muslim commander during that time. He led the expeditions to al-Qarada, in the Najd;<sup>37</sup> to Bani Sulaym at al-Jamum;<sup>38</sup> to al'Iys;<sup>39</sup> to at-Taraf;<sup>40</sup> to Wadi al-Qura, twice;<sup>41</sup> to Hisma';<sup>42</sup> and he was first in command during the Battle of Mu'tah, where he was martyred leading his force of approximately 3,000 Muslims against a Byzantine force numbering upwards to 200,000 men.<sup>43</sup>

The most significant point of his story, as it relates to this article, is that Zayd b. Haritha was black.<sup>44</sup> In *Tanwir al-Ghabash*, Ibn Jawzi describes him as "a short man, very black, with a flat nose."<sup>45</sup> To the Prophet, Peace and Blessing of God upon him, Zayd was like the son he never had, his own male offspring having all died in their infancy.<sup>46</sup>

Baraka bint Tha'laba, who was also known as Umm Ayman, was one of the most beloved people to the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon. She became his bondswoman after the death of his mother, and he freed her the day that he married Khadijah<sup>47</sup>. She was one of the principal field nurses among the women Companions, attending the Battles of Uhud, Khaybar, and Hunayn. The Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, Abu Bakr, and Umar used to visit her.<sup>48</sup> The Prophet used to refer to her as "My mother after my mother,"<sup>49</sup> and when he looked at her he would say, "This is the last surviving member of my immediate family."<sup>50</sup> She was a black woman of Ethiopian descent.<sup>51</sup>

These two, Zayd b. Haritha and Umm Ayman, married and she bore him a son, Usama. He was one of the most beloved of all people to the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him. He was sometimes affectionately referred to as the son of Muhammad, Peace and Blessings of God upon him.<sup>52</sup> He was also called *Hibbu Hibbi Rasullah* (the beloved of the beloved of the Messenger of Allah). Like his mother and father, he was black.<sup>53</sup>

Hence, the lad the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon Him, adopted and appended to his lineage, the boy he affectionately called his son, and the woman he would call his mother, after the death of his biological mother, were all black people. This is the most powerful testimony one can give as to the attitude of the Prophet towards race. Similar

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<sup>37</sup> Samira az-Zayid, *Mukhtasar al-Jami' fi as-Sirah an-Nabawiyya*, (Damascus: Samira az-Zayid, 1995/1416) 1:403.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 2:87.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 2:87-89.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 2:89.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2:89-90.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 2:127.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 2:181-190.

<sup>44</sup> Although Zayd was black, he was not an African. He was of pure Arab lineage from the Tribe of Kalb. His lineage is mentioned by Ibn Hisham, 1: 212.

<sup>45</sup> Alawiye, p. 132.

<sup>46</sup> Before the birth of Ibrahim to Mariya al-Qubtiyya in Medina, the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon had three sons by Khadija in Mecca: al-Qasim, 'Abdullah, and at-Tahir. They all died in their infancy. See Az-Zayid, 1:122.

<sup>47</sup> Alawiye, p. 143.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>49</sup> Ibn Hajar al-'Aqalani, *al-Isaba fi Tamyiz as-Sahaba*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Tarath al-'Arabi, 1910/1327) 4:432.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 4:432.

<sup>51</sup> Alawiye, p. 143.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 132. It should be noted here that it is common for Arab grandparents to refer to their grandchildren as their sons and daughters, as opposed to grandson or granddaughter.

<sup>53</sup> Ibn Athir, 1:81.

affection and honor were afforded to many other black companions.

The prophetic practice regarding race was not confined to his personal life and associations. Rather, in his public policies, he took measures, which designated the highest offices to some of his black companions. We have mentioned the many commands he entrusted to Zayd b. Haritha. The last force he dispatched before his death was placed under the command of Usama b. Zayd. Usama had under his command some of the most eminent Companions, including Abu Bakr and ‘Umar. He was given that command despite his young age, mentioned variously as being between sixteen to twenty years.

The most esteemed public office in Islam, in terms of its otherworldly reward is the position of the *Mu’adhdhin* (the caller to the congregational prayer). Bilal was the first and principal holder of this position during the Prophetic period. In fact, the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, designated the Ethiopians as being especially suited for that office. He said, “The call to prayer is for the Ethiopians...”<sup>54</sup> Bilal also was the Prophet’s, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, treasurer. He was referred to by many of the companions as “Our leader.” Jabir relates that Umar used to say, “Abu Bakr was our leader, and he liberated our leader, referring to Bilal.”<sup>55</sup> It is well-known that Bilal was a black man of Ethiopian lineage.

A policy of deeper implications for Muslim society during the Prophetic epoch was his practice of marrying his black companions to the women of aristocratic Arab families. These marriages were intentionally designed to rid his society of attitudes about class and race-based bigotry. Had this prophetic practice endured, many of the racist attitudes plaguing some contemporary Muslim societies may have been alleviated.

An example of such marriages is that of Zayd b. Haritha, who we have previously mentioned, to Zaynab bint Jahsh, before her marriage to the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him. Zaynab was an exceedingly beautiful and refined Arab woman of noble lineage, and exalted character. She was from the Prophet’s very family, being the daughter of his paternal aunt, Umaymah. Here she was being called to marry a black man, who had formerly been enslaved. She and her brother resisted the idea of marrying Zayd until the issue was addressed by revelation, *It is not becoming of a believing man or woman, once God and His Messenger have decreed an affair, to have an option to follow their own choice.*<sup>56</sup> After learning of this verse, Zaynab was pleased, and submitted to marry Zayd. Their marriage addressed both the class and race-based prejudices that were prevalent in Arabian society at that time.

Another marriage of this type was that of Julaybib, a black companion, to the daughter of an Ansar<sup>57</sup> man whose wife defiantly refused the order of the Prophet, Peace and blessing of God upon him. However, the daughter, owing to her piety, intervened and asked that the Prophet’s decree, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, be implemented, expressing her confidence in the wisdom of his decision. The Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, appreciating her piety, prayed that she be blessed by God, and given a life

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<sup>54</sup> Abu ‘Isa Muhammad at-Tirmidhi, *Jami’ at-Tirmidhi* (Riyadh: Dar as-Salaam, 1999/1420) p. 885, #3936. The full text of this tradition reads, “Political authority lies with the Quraysh, the judiciary is best executed by the Ansar, the call to prayer is for the Ethiopians, and the trust is best kept by the people of Azd (the Yemenis).

<sup>55</sup> Alawiye, p. 130.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Qur’an 33:36. Imam Tabari mentions several narrations which relate this incident, and convey Zaynab’s approval to marry Zayd in light of this verse and the Prophet’s, Peace and Blessing of God upon him, request. See Abu Ja’far Muhammad b. Jarir at-Tabari, *Jami’ al-Bayan fi Ta’wil al-Qur’an*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1997/1418) 10:301.

<sup>57</sup> Ansar refers to members of the Muslim community of Medina who received and assisted the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, and his companions who had migrated from Mecca to their city.

of ease. Their marriage was very successful. Julaybib was subsequently martyred, slaying seven enemy combatants in his immediate vicinity, before meeting his own demise. The Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, learning of his state repeatedly said, “He is of me and I am of him.”<sup>58</sup>

These marriages were not isolated events. Hence, one has to see them as part of a conscious policy being undertaken by the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, to address a flaw in the fledgling Muslim polity. I will mention one other marriage of this type. It was that of a black Arab named Sa’d al-Aswad. Sa’d was an Arab of pure lineage, from Bani Sulaym. He came to the Prophet, Peace and blessings of God upon him, and asked him if his dark complexion and unpleasant features would prevent him from entering Paradise. The Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, responded that they would not, as long as he was mindful of his Lord and believed in Him. Sa’d immediately accepted Islam. Sa’d then explained to the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, that he had searched assiduously for a wife, but had been rejected by all and sundry because of his dark complexion. The Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, sent Sa’d to marry the daughter of ‘Amr bin Wahhab, a recent convert from Bani Thaqif, who retained many pre-Islamic prejudices.

Sa’d attained to ‘Amr’s door and informed him that the Prophet had ordered him to marry his daughter to him. ‘Amr flatly refused. His daughter, overhearing the conversation between her father and the stranger, interceded telling her father to relent before he be disgraced by revelation. ‘Amr went to the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, and was strongly rebuked for repulsing Sa’d. ‘Amr promptly married his daughter to Sa’d. As Sa’d was in the market purchasing provisions for his new wife, he heard a caller rallying the faithful for a military expedition. He forgot about his marriage, purchased arms and a steed and proceeded to the battlefield, where he fought valiantly until he was slain. Learning of his death, the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, went to him and placed his head in his lap until his grave was prepared. He ordered that his arms and mount be sent to his wife’s family, informing them that God had married him to one better than their daughter in Paradise.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

There are other aspects of the Prophet’s, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, public policy that we could examine, such as his twice sending his companions to Ethiopia to live under the protection of an African king, the Negus. However, we will limit ourselves to what we have mentioned above. From these few examples, the prophetic orientation towards race and race relations should be clear. As one can see, Islam, in its foundational teachings, seeks to eradicate the attitudes and prejudices that lead to the emergence of racism and bigotry in human society. It is these teachings that have enduring attraction to the legions of people entering Islam from all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In this country, Muslims have a unique opportunity to contribute towards eliminating the most nagging and festering social ill plaguing our society: race-based

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<sup>58</sup> See Ibn Athir, 1:348. Also, Alawiye, pp. 138-140. The basis of Julaybib’s story is in Sahih al-Bukhari. See Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bari*, 9:505-506, #5283.

<sup>59</sup> For a full account of the story of Sa’d al-Aswad see Ibn Athir, 2:336-337; and Alawiye, pp. 135-138.

prejudice.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, many Muslims have endorsed this disease by either refusing to acknowledge its existence, or through their attitudes and actions towards their coreligionists of darker complexions. Both are unacceptable. One of the ways to remove such attitudes is through understanding the imperative given us by our Prophet's teachings, Peace and Blessings of God upon him, to work towards the creation of a social order where there is no room for racism. If such work is to be meaningful, it will have to start in our own homes, Mosques, and Islamic centers.

Critics of this article may claim that we have evaded any discussion of the deep institutional racism that has historically plagued the Muslim world, and continues to do so. Until that glaring social dysfunction is addressed, a Muslim has no right to criticize racism in American society, a society that has made great strides towards eliminating some of the manifestations of institutional racism from its midst. As we mentioned in the introduction, addressing such issues has not been the purpose of this article. We might add that as long as the type of institutional racism which leads a disproportionately higher number of African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, and other minorities in this country to prisons rather than to university classrooms, as compared to their white counterparts, there is much work to be done. Similarly, the widespread racist defamation of Arabs, South Asians, and others believed to be from Muslim lands currently occurring in this country indicates that the attitudes and social culture that provide a fertile breeding ground for racism are still widespread. As long as that is the case, it is imperative that we work against racism here, the land of our birth. Hopefully, our example, if we are serious, will inspire Muslims in other lands to address the deep racism plaguing their societies.

We have the brilliant prophetic example to guide us in undertaking such work. We also have the inspiring lives of countless American Muslims who have been rescued by Islam from the travails of racism. We have no better spokesperson in this regard than Malcolm X, who wrote from the sacred precincts of Mecca:

During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) -while praying to the *same* God- with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blonds, and whose skins were the

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<sup>60</sup> Our assessment that racism is the greatest problem plaguing American society is not new. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote over one hundred years ago, based on his experience in America, "...the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line." W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1989) p. xxxi. Well over a half century later James Baldwin would write the following powerful passage, "If we -and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others -do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world." James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963) p. 141. For those who feel these are the ruminations of radical intellectuals, Martin Luther King Jr., a member of the black Christian middle class, concluded, after a career struggling for integration, "Yet the largest portion of white America is still poisoned by racism, which is as native to our soil as pine trees, sagebrush, and buffalo grass." James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1986) p. 316. More recently, Dr. Cornel West writes, "Race is the most explosive issue in American life precisely because it forces us to confront the tragic facts of poverty and paranoia, despair and distrust. In short, a candid examination of *race matters* takes us to the core of the crisis of American democracy. And the degree to which race *matters* in the plight and predicament of fellow citizens is a crucial measure of whether we can keep alive the best of this democratic experiment we call America." See Cornel West, *Race Matters*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) pp. 155-156.

whitest of white. And in the *words* and in the *actions* and in the *deeds* of the ‘white’ Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana.

We were *truly* all the same (brothers) –because their belief in one God had removed the ‘white’ from their *minds*, the ‘white’ from their *behavior*, and the ‘white’ from their *attitude*.

I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in *reality* the Oneness of Man –and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their ‘differences’ in color.<sup>61</sup> (Italics in the original)

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<sup>61</sup> Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992) pp. 340-341.