

NAME: FAISAL TAHIR MUSA

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RACISM

Racism is the belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another, that a person's social and moral traits are predetermined by his or her inborn biological characteristics. Racial separatism is the belief, most of the time based on racism, that different races should remain segregated and apart from one another. It may be defined as the hatred of one person by another — or the belief that another person is less than human — because of skin color, language, customs, place of birth or any factor that supposedly reveals the basic nature of that person. It has influenced wars, slavery, the formation of nations, and legal codes.

During the past 500-1000 years, racism on the part of Western powers toward non-Westerners has had a far more significant impact on history than any other form of racism (such as racism among Western groups or among Easterners, such as Asians, Africans, and others). The most notorious example of racism by the West has been slavery, particularly the enslavement of Africans in the New World (slavery itself dates back thousands of years). This enslavement was accomplished because of the racist belief that Black Africans were less fully human than white Europeans and their descendants.

This belief was not "automatic": that is, Africans were not originally considered inferior. When Portuguese sailors first explored Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries, they came upon empires and cities as advanced as their own, and they considered Africans to be serious rivals. Over time, though, as African civilizations failed to match the technological advances of Europe, and

the major European powers began to plunder the continent and forcibly remove its inhabitants to work as slave laborers in new colonies across the Atlantic, Africans came to be seen as a deficient "species," as "savages." To an important extent, this view was necessary to justify the slave trade at a time when Western culture had begun to promote individual rights and human equality. The willingness of some Africans to sell other Africans to European slave traders also led to claims of savagery, based on the false belief that the "dark people" were all kinsmen, all part of one society — as opposed to many different, sometimes warring nations.

One important feature of racism, especially toward Blacks and immigrant groups, is clear in attitudes regarding slaves and slavery. Jews are usually seen by anti-Semites as subhuman but also superhuman: devilishly cunning, skilled, and powerful. Blacks and others are seen by racists as merely subhuman, more like beasts than men. If the focus of anti-Semitism is evil, the focus of racism is inferiority — directed toward those who have sometimes been considered to lack even the ability to be evil (though in the 20th century, especially, victims of racism are often considered morally degraded). Racism can happen just about anywhere. Research indicates that the places where racism is experienced most frequently include in the neighbourhood, shops, and in the workplace. It can emerge in other spaces such as on public transport, sporting events or at schools.

Expressions of racism can also be found in media. This happens when, for example, racial groups are represented in an unfair or negative light in news reports or commentary. Many regard the lack of cultural diversity represented in media as another form of racism.

In recent years, racism has become a particular problem online. Whether it is offensive comments on social media, inflammatory memes or hateful videos shared online, cyber-racism has had a significant impact on the growth of

racist attitudes. Those spreading racist messages can often do so with the benefit of anonymity. People aren't born with racist ideas or attitudes. Racism is something that is learned.

There remain a small minority of people who believe that some races are superior to others. While most people in Australia today accept the diversity of our society, some also believe racial groups should not mix. A belief in racial superiority or purity can lead to racial hatred.

However, not all racism comes from hatred. Some of it can come from fear and anxiety. People may worry that some groups pose a threat, whether to the safety of the community, or to the national identity. Ignorance can play a part in feeding people's racial attitudes, as can a need to belong to one's own group. Racism isn't always malicious. Sometimes the harm of racism can be done innocently, because someone may not know better. Racism causes harm to those who are on the receiving end. It hurts individuals, communities and our society at large.

Studies show that experiencing racism has profound effects on people's health and welfare. The effects can include feelings of sadness and anger, even anxiety and depression. The regular experience of racism can lead to people withdrawing from work or study, and diminish their quality of life. It can also hurt people's freedom and dignity. Those who endure racism can be made to feel they have less freedom, or are second-class citizens.

In a diverse country such as Australia, the effects of racism aren't confined to individuals. It has the potential to affect all of us. Racial hostility creates a society where people don't trust and respect each other. It challenges our society's values of equality and fairness.

To create change, we have to reexamine our own views and actions in light of a pain that is deeply felt but too often ignored. Issues of human dignity will not abide standing on the sidelines.

This is a moment when many people may want nothing more than a return to normalcy, or to a status quo that is only comfortable if we avert our gaze from injustice. As difficult as it may be to admit, that desire is itself a sign of

privilege. George Floyd's death is shocking and tragic proof that we must aim far higher than a "normal" future, and build one that lives up to the highest ideals of equality and justice. In the words of Martin Luther King, "Every society has its protectors of status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. Today, our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change."

In conclusion, racism is indeed the predicament that has blinded most parts of the world and needs to come to a halt.