

King's dream not yet realized

Dawn

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I HAVE a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their characters.

The eloquence and sheer power of Martin Luther King's address on August 28, 1963, as evident from the excerpts mentioned above, moves hearts even today, forty years after he made it on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. That address, before a gathering of 250,000 in the nation's capital, was one of the turning points in the civil rights movement to free black Americans from discrimination, and give them the 'inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'

Forty years on, has Martin Luther King's dream been realized? Do black people in America today sit as equals with whites? Is racial discrimination well and truly a thing of the past?

There is no definitive answer to these questions. On one level, black Americans do enjoy the same rights and opportunities as whites. They have the right to vote, to eat in any restaurant and travel on any bus, to go to any college or university, to get

The other problem is that changes in law do not automatically equate to changes in the psyche. Racial discrimination has been wiped off the statute books but it still exists in the minds of many white Americans.

It finds its manifestation in hidden, covert racism — the glass ceiling that stops blacks getting to the top of the corporate, political or academic ladder; the policy that prescribes prison as the solution to black social problems; the stereotyping that regards all blacks with suspicion.

But it can also be manifested overtly — as seen in the brutal beating of Rodney King and the acquittal of his police attackers. Eliminating racism from inside the heads of American whites is a struggle still to be won.

So no, Martin Luther King's dream has not been totally realized and hence, yes, his address still has relevance today. But its relevance forty years on extends far beyond America and far beyond the struggle to end racial discrimination. King's message applies as much, if not more, to the new Muslim 'Negroes' in American society and the discrimination they face.

In today's America you can get beaten up because you are wearing a headscarf, or because you have a beard. You can be fired from your job because your name is Muhammed. You can be arrested and held for long periods because you speak with an Arabic accent. You can be forced off a plane because you have a Middle Eastern or South Asian appearance.

Is there any difference between the discrimination that the Muslims in the United States face today and the anti-Negro discrimination that Martin Luther king campaigned to end forty years ago? The difference,

whatever job they want. There are no legal barriers to their progress. Indeed, thanks to positive discrimination, they actually enjoy some legal advantages over their white counterparts.

The list of African-Americans who have benefited from this freedom and have made their mark in society is long: innumerable black singers and performers, writers, politicians, sportsmen and women, academics, entrepreneurs. Recall Halle Berry and Denzel Washington — both black — winning Oscars in the same year for best actress and best actor respectively.

Look at the massive popularity of the Oprah Winfrey Show. Note the unprecedented number of black faces in senior positions in the Bush administration — Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice. Marvel at the accomplishments of Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan. 'The Negro' has indeed come far since Martin Luther King lamented his plight on August 28, 1963.

But this is not true for all Negroes. For every Will Smith and Alice Walker success story, there are hundreds of black Americans who have fallen by the wayside. Poverty, ignorance and crime: these are the daily realities for a large part of today's blacks. According to a report by the US Justice department one-third of black Americans born in 2001 will go to prison at some point in their lives. 25 per cent of American blacks are below the poverty line. These statistics are far higher than for the whites, or even other ethnic communities. Clearly, legal equality has failed to deliver social equality.

The explanation for this situation lies partly within the black community itself, and partly in American society. Opportunities will only yield benefits when they are seized and used. Many American blacks have not seized and used the opportunities created for them by legal equalization: opportunities to study, to get jobs, to prosper.

Many are their own worst enemies, pulling themselves back through truancy, crime and drugs. If the black community is ever to progress from the bottom-most rung of the ladder, it will have to take a long, hard look at its own failings and weaknesses.

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discrimination. For a start, it is a phenomenon that is gaining momentum not just in America but throughout the western world. The rise of the European right — in Italy, the Netherlands, France — and the tightening of asylum laws across the continent are clear indicators of Europe's Islamophobia.

The other difference is in context. Racial discrimination took place against a historical legacy of slavery. By contrast, today's religious discrimination is taking place against a backdrop of universally acknowledged and accepted human rights, including freedom of religious worship.

Put simply, discrimination against blacks occurred as the world was moving away from ignorance towards tolerance. Discrimination against muslims represents a move in the opposite direction: civilization regression rather than progress.

Muslims became the new 'Negroes' in the aftermath of 9/11 and as a consequence of the war against terror. Their battle against prejudice and discrimination is only beginning — unlike that against racial discrimination, which is half won. Thus, forty years on, Martin Luther King's vision of a nation in which people will 'be judged by the content of their character' is more a Muslim's dream than a black man's.