

Is religion a help or a hindrance to racial equality?

Undoubtedly, religion provides an exemplary way of living for believers. This means that individuals who conform to a religion, strive to live a morally and religiously correct life. Christianity for example encourages the following of the Ten Commandments in order to ensure values and as a basis for righteousness. Similarly, Buddhists attempt to live according to the Śīla in following right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

Although religion illustrates a 'correct' way of living, these ways of living in themselves are open to interpretation. As a result, religion does not guarantee a specific perspective or demeanour and we see religious extremities on both sides of all cultures. Tennessee has historically had a dominating Christian population, 81% in 2014, yet this is the same state in which the Ku Klux Klan was founded. This implies that religion does not assert values of freedom and equality in everybody and therefore cannot be considered neither a help or a hindrance. Different individuals will interpret religion in different ways depending on their environment or culture. Subsequently, religion cannot be defined as a help in racial equality given that its positive and negative effects varies across the globe in differing circumstances.

Recently, religion could be considered a hindrance to racial equality due to extremist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda. Such groups act on their beliefs and views of religion which encourages them to act in a cruel and inhumane manner. Due to the endorsement of their religion, certain individuals who have seen the effect of terrorism in their own communities, have directly connected terrorism with Islam. After the string of 2016 terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS across Europe in particular, the rate of islamophobia and hate crimes towards Muslims soared. According to 'The Independent', 52% of the British population believed that Islam 'posed a threat to the British way of life' in 2017. This proves that religion is a hindrance to racial equality given that individuals are categorised as 'terrorists' simply for being of the same religion. Some members of society failed, and still fail to see, that although they may belong to the same religion, a vast majority of Muslim people do not hold the same radical and extremist views. Therefore, perhaps religion could be considered a help in racial equality, as long as we learn about other religions and the possibly harmful interpretations. Research by Hinojosa and Park that combined different ethnicities' views on different religions concluded that 'religion does little to draw blacks and whites together in their thinking about racial inequality.' This conveys that racial inequalities may derive from social constructs, given that 52% of white people stated that a 'lack of motivation' was an explanation for racial inequality. As a result, generalised social attitudes perhaps have more of an impact on racial inequality than religion does.

Contrastingly, this problem is worsened by acts of terror for example, which causes deep-rooted and personal conflict. 9/11 for example was the biggest and most extreme act of terrorism in history and remains an understandably sensitive topic.

Islamophobia in the US rose from 14% to 43% after the attack and racist slurs such as “terrorist” were used to degrade Muslims globally. This generalised and racist view is still prominent in today’s society and new Islamic terrorist groups such as ISIS only reinforce this wide-spread notion of Islamophobia. As a result, any individual who identifies as Muslim is likely to be a victim of racial inequality and abuse at some point in their life.

On the other hand, it must be said that the vast majority of every religion hold morally just values. These values typically endorse the fair treatment of others such as in the Biblical book of Mark “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Ultimately neither our religion or race should define us and we should accept one another and learn in an ever globalising and multi-cultural society that different is normal.