

Yes, Muslims are different. No, we shouldn't accept that

Trevor Phillips says "the rest of us" should accept that British Muslims are "unlike others in Britain". His moral relativism is wrong and divisive



Muslim women

By James Kirkup

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Oh dear. Where to start with Trevor Phillips? It's tempting not to bother, since you have to wonder if he just says silly things just to get attention. He is, after all, a former journalist, and old habits die hard.

But let's assume he's serious about what he said at Policy Exchange this week about British Muslims:

"Continuously pretending that a group is somehow eventually going to become like the rest of us is perhaps the deepest form of disrespect.

"Because what you are essentially saying is the fact that they behave in a different way, some of which we may not like, is because they haven't yet seen the light. It may be that they see the world differently to the rest of us."

In other words, we mustn't talk about Muslims integrating into British society and living lives that are more like the lives of their non-Muslim compatriots. We should accept that Muslims are different and respect their different ways.

If “becoming like the rest of us” means becoming healthier and wealthier and enjoying more economic and social opportunity, then I have to plead guilty to what Mr Phillips considers “the deepest form of disrespect”.

And yes, in one way, we should. We should respect that Muslims practice a faith that is not followed by non-Muslims. That is their right, unquestioned by pretty much everyone, I think. Or at least everyone who accepts that the Middle Ages are over and that forcible attempts at converting heathen souls to Christianity aren't really very polite.

On the other hand, there are some big and important differences between Muslims and non-Muslims. Differences that we cannot and should not tolerate.

We know, thanks to the work of Sundas Ali at Oxford among others, that British Muslims are on average more likely to live in poor housing, in poor areas, to have worse health, to be economically inactive and when they do work to do so in lower-skilled, lower-paid occupations. They are also less likely to marry outside their faith or have significant numbers of friendships with non-Muslims. And they are liable to face abuse and prejudice and discrimination that non-Muslims do not.

These are all bad things, differences that we should not tolerate. If “becoming like the rest of us” means becoming healthier and wealthier and enjoying more economic and social opportunity, then I have to plead guilty to what Mr Phillips considers “the deepest form of disrespect”. I want British Muslims to be more rich and free than they are today. I make no apology for that.

And yes, there are other differences too, things that some (and please note that word “some”; it's very, very important, and really doesn't get used enough) Muslims do that other people in this country generally do not.

Does Mr Phillips' implied relativism mean we should adopt an attitude of supreme indifference to *some* Muslims' insistence on cousin marriage and thus congenital deformity? That the attitude of *some* Muslim men towards women (Muslim and non-) and the subsequent harm done to the wellbeing, freedom and happiness of those women should simply be accepted as “seeing the world differently”? That it's not reasonable to at least ask whether all the Muslim women and

girls who cover their face and hair do so entirely freely and without coercion? And what of the fact that *some* Muslims are sympathetic to and even engage in violence in the name of their faith?



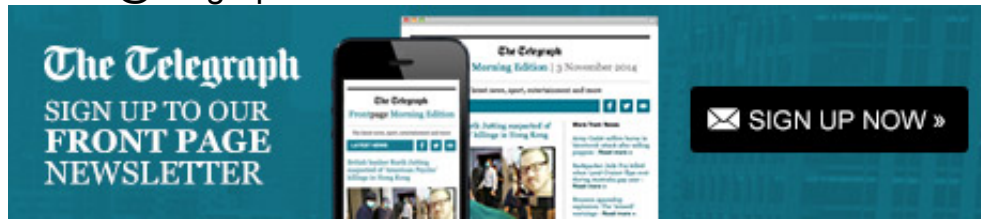
David Cameron speaks with women attending an English language class during a visit to the Shantona Women's Centre in Leeds

I sincerely hope Mr Phillips is not saying that differences that entail real and demonstrable harm, *very often to Muslims*, must be mutely accepted as a different way of life that must be respected as equally valid, instead of being debated openly in a calm and civilised way. For the sort of silent acceptance he appears to suggest is a sure and certain way for those harms to continue unchecked. That's not something we would tolerate if the harms were being done to members of any other group. Why would we accept it in this context?

Yes, British Muslims differ from the norm. So do British Hindus, British Sikhs and British Christians: none of us is perfectly "normal", since "normal" is an aggregate of all our differences. But they are in a fundamental sense the same as anyone else in this country: deserving of the longest, richest, more free and fulfilled lives possible.

And I can't think of anything more likely to prevent them living such lives, and to maintaining and reinforcing the lines that divide us, than nonsensical and ill-thought suggestions from people who really should know better that British Muslims are not like "the rest of us". They're not the other, alien entities destined to live different lives. This is their country too, and they should be able to enjoy all the freedom and opportunity it offers. They are us.

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