

Review of the Minority Lawyers Conference 1997

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The Minority Lawyers Conference 1997, which was held on Saturday the 29th November 1997 at the Law Society's Hall, was a memorable event for two main reasons: It was the first time that such a conference, bringing together as it did all the minority groups of lawyers together under one roof, had taken place; and it was the first time that the Association of Muslim Lawyers had been represented at such a conference.

Although the main emphasis throughout the Conference was placed on the continuing need to ensure equal opportunities within the legal system for lawyers belonging to minority ethnic groups – with reference also being made to the removal of glass ceilings as well as concrete roofs, the spokesman for the AML who was permitted to say a few words near the end of the Conference did also point out that as well as sex and racial discrimination, there is sometimes also the heavy lead door of religious discrimination that bars the way forward.

Since the AML spokesman's skin was almost as white as the Lord Chancellor's, there was some surprise expressed that he was there at all as a representative of a minority group. How could he possibly understand or be at the receiving end of either racial or sex prejudice from WASPS (White Anglo-Saxon Public School) personnel, especially since his accent was definitely not provincial? Having pointed out, however, that in the United Kingdom the Muslims are a *religious* minority comprised of people with every skin-colour under the sun, who often have to endure *religious* discrimination from other people as opposed to, although sometimes as well as, racial and sex discrimination, then the point was made and on the whole understood,

Certainly as far as the members of the AML were concerned, the Conference was a positive experience, because the track record of the other more long-established minority groups of lawyers clearly demonstrated that if you organise yourselves and present your particular viewpoint coherently, then in all likelihood the numbers of those who are aware of it, and who understand it, and who do something about it, will inevitably increase. As the Lord Chancellor himself pointed out in his keynote address: 'Don't be shy – Apply!' Acting on these words, (which were in fact principally intended for those considering taking silk), the AML has now formally requested the Law Society to include the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion in its Solicitors' Anti-Discrimination Code – a step which the Bar Council has already taken as regards its Equality Code for the Bar.

On a more philosophical note, and in order to make the point mentioned above more firmly – by illustrating the *difference* between racial and religious discrimination for those who somehow seem to think or wish to pretend that they are virtually synonymous, Confucius is reputed to have said, 'Underneath the skin everyone is the same.' In many respects this is an accurate observation. We all share the same internal organs, our blood is always red, we all experience love and hate and fear and exultation. However, degrees of awareness can be very different from person to person, as can attitudes and perceptions regarding the nature of existence and the way things are and what behaviour is acceptable or unacceptable – and it is clear to most intelligent people that there is not necessarily any direct correlation between these more subtle aspects of the human psyche and skin colour. There are no such absolutes as 'the black psyche' or 'the white psyche'. A white man who spent all his early years in Zambia or Zimbabwe, for example, may well turn out to be far more 'African' than a black man who has lived most of his life in either Baltimore or Brixton!

However there is far more to this matter than the usual 'genes versus environment' discussion allows. The teachings of Islam confirm that there are basically two kinds of people on this earth, the *muminun* and the *kafirun* – that is, those who accept prophetic guidance and trust in God – and those who do not; and furthermore that both the *kafirun* and the *muminun* come in all shapes and colours. Because their hearts are veiled, the *kafirun* are far more prone to judge by outward appearances, such as for example skin colour and status symbol display, whereas the *muminun* are more concerned with the inward state of their hearts and the ultimate destination that awaits each one of us on the other side of death. Whereas the *kafirun* may be defiantly saying either, 'Black is beautiful,' or 'Black is bad,' the *muminun* are more likely to be delightedly saying: '*Our colour is from Allah – and who is better than Allah at giving colour? – and we are His worshippers.*' (Qur'an 2.136-138).

Since the AML were invited to participate in the Minority Lawyers Conference 1997 at rather short notice, it was not possible for the organisers to allocate the AML representatives with very much 'airspace'. Hopefully when its time comes around once more, it will be possible for the Association of Muslim Lawyers to present and discuss the issues raised here in greater detail and depth.

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