

**Deloitte.**The Cambridge Union Society
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Cambridge, CB2 1UBEmail : pressofficer@cus.org**PRESS RELEASE - 07/03/2015****What's Faith Got To Do With It? Faith, Feminism and Intersectionality Forum**

On 7th March 2015, the Cambridge Union Society, in collaboration with MAGNIFY, the UK's first faith, feminism and fashion magazine, and FLY, the University of Cambridge's BME Women's Forum, hosted a forum on faith and feminism in celebration of the upcoming International Women's Day.

Justina Kehinde Ogunseitan, the Chair for the evening, opened the event by welcoming the members and speaking in general terms about the importance of faith to many feminists, and in particular how important faith is to many women of colour as a part of their identities.

Suhaimah Manzoor-Khan, an undergraduate student at the University of Cambridge, spoke first, addressing the attendees on the difficulty she personally has experienced in bringing up her faith, even in intersectional spaces. She discussed the "white saviour" complex, and the still common opinion that Islam is an inherently oppressive religion to women, that non-Muslims know better and need to rescue Muslim women from this perceived oppression. She talked about the areas where feminism can let Muslim women down – especially concerning the wearing of the hijab, which she feels is over-focussed on by feminist discourse in Britain. She explained that she believes it is important that feminism and faith work together to ensure both of these things reach their full potential.

The second speaker for the evening was the **Reverend Liz Adekunle**, a priest in the Church of England and the chaplain of St John's College. She began her speech by saying that, as one of the very few black, female priests in the C of E, she disagrees that Christianity is an inherently patriarchal religion, but does feel that it is often misapplied. She discussed the process of female erasure in lectionaries, and pointed out the "weight of tradition" seeking to channel women into very specific paths. Yet her speech contained notes of optimism, discussing how far the Church has come, even if it still has quite some way to go, and mentioning modern moves to help women feel more included in Christianity, such as female representations of Christ.

Diamond Abdulrahim, another student of the University of Cambridge, opened by explaining the difference between a Muslim feminist and an Islamic feminist: a Muslim feminist identifies as both a Muslim and a feminist; an Islamic feminist gets their feminist views from the teachings of Islam itself. Diamond identifies as an Islamic feminist. She stressed the importance of feminist circles accepting that feminism works with faith, and it will be impossible for feminism to be truly intersectional until this is accepted. She spoke of the issues around the white, western mainstream feminism focussing on the hijab as a symbol, as this means other problems that Muslim women face are overlooked in favour of what people who lack a real religious understanding consider important.

Ruth Yimika Awogbade, founder of MAGNIFY, discussed in a Q&A session her journey through faith and feminism, and her magazine. She spoke of her loss of faith following bereavement, but when she came back to faith and realised how special it was to her, she wanted to make others more aware of it. Despite avoiding identifying as a feminist for some time, when she examined the roots of feminism she found that it did capture her feelings. She discussed her view of feminism and faith as being in harmony, talking about Jesus' good treatment of women. When asked about MAGNIFY, she said she wanted to challenge what one traditionally (or stereotypically) thinks about faith, feminism and fashion.

The forum then opened up to questions from the floor.

Rev' Adekunle was asked about how to reconcile female bishops against Church teaching, to which she responded that, at least from a Church of England perspective, male preachers is tradition, not doctrine. Diamond said the case was almost inverted in Islam, as at the time of Islam's origin there were many female leaders, and it is only now, with the emergence of women leading prayers, that we are returning to that.

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The question of how to be a good ally was raised, and Suhaiymah said the most important thing was to listen and not to speak over others. Diamond added the importance of unlearning oppressive behaviour and ensuring that all spaces are fully accessible. Liz also said that vocally affirming women is very important, and Justina added the centrality of being respectful.

When asked about the maleness of God, Diamond explained that her conceptualisation of God is not gendered, and in the Qu'ran God is often referred to as "We". Suhaiymah added that she believes that calling God "He" is because that was what made most sense to early scholars. Liz said that in her own preaching, she tries to stress the genderless nature of God.

When asked about female oppression in Islamic countries, Diamond explained that sharia law is not a divine law, and Suhaiymah added that any ideology can be manipulated to cause harm, citing Stalinist manipulation of socialism as an example. Diamond spoke of her hijab as being a political statement against the consumerisation of beauty standards, worlds apart from a symbol of oppression.

The question of the onus being on women to maintain pure was brought up, and Liz responded by again stressing that this is much more of a tradition-driven social issue, not a scriptural bias. Suhaiymah raised the point that removing the religious element of this, the double standard of male success and female shame around sexual relations still exists.

On tackling the issue of sexual violence within communities where it is particularly difficult to speak out, Diamond praised many charities for their efforts, and the suggestion of places of worship just for women was met with support as a possible way to help.

When asked about the difficulty of intersectionality between faith and the LGBT+ community, Suhaiymah admitted that this does seem to be an issue for people, especially as people seem to assume that she would hold homophobic views, but she thinks that there is progress in the right direction. She expressed a desire for the groups to become more intersectional, in part because she thinks the experiences of many people in the Islamic community and the LGBT+ community are very similar. Diamond spoke highly of organisations aiming to support LGBT+ individuals of faith, saying that visibility is very important.

An audience member asked how one reconciles feminism with the Muslim teaching that a man can have many wives. Suhaiymah explained that the context of this was very important: the teaching was written after a war in which many men had died, and as women were not breadwinners and needed support, this was seen as the best way of looking after women, and a clause of this was that the man must support all his wives equally. She added that she thinks this is an outdated teaching.

The importance of not viewing Islam as a homogenous entity was raised several times, and Diamond spoke in detail about the importance of understanding the cultural differences that exist in different areas of the world, and that it is important always to remain respectful and listen.

The event was a great success, with people from all faiths and none coming away feeling that they had learnt something new, been able to discuss things that interested them and had the chance to interact in an intersectional environment.

By Helen Dallas

Co-Head of Press, Lent 2015