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On Inclusivity

Bashar Jabbour

Every Ramadan I have to repeatedly explain to my white friends why I am not fasting. It is a relatively simple question which manages to erase so many identities in one fell swoop. Starting with the fact that not all Syrians are Muslim. Not all Arabs are Muslim. Not all those who look like me are Muslim. Even those who are Muslim, not all Muslims celebrate Ramadan (see Druze Muslims). Not all Muslims who celebrate Ramadan, fast. Not all those who fast, fast every year or every day. Not all Muslims who celebrate Eid undertake fasting in Ramadan.

Beyond the identities conversation, for many fasters, Ramadan is a very spiritual and personal time of the year. It is a time to reflect, to grow, and to engage with one's own faith and community. While talking about a spiritual journey with friends and acquaintances is perfectly fine for some people, this is definitely not the case for everyone. To inquire openly about someone's faith without their consent can be very frustrating.

For me personally, the question is infuriating particularly when it comes from white Christian communities. My paternal side of the family is Christian. I have grown up in church. The Syrian Christian community is literally the oldest Christian community in the world. I was born a 100 km northeast of Bethlehem. This question that you ask me, year in & year out, erases 2 million Christian Syrians. This identity you choose to place on me (a fasting Muslim) erases us. We are actively left out of conversation around Christianity as brown folks.

So, what started as an attempt at 'religious inclusivity' ends up being this alienating line of questioning. In some ways, this is due to ignorance. But largely, it is because the whole idea of 'religious inclusivity', as we understand it, is rooted in White Supremacy. The very idea that White communities need to 'include' us is rooted in White Supremacy. We have been building community and faith despite our active exclusion, for hundreds of years. I do not want to be included in these structures that have always disparaged me and my community. I want to build new communities, where we play a central role as anyone in the building process.

As a closing thought, if while reading this, you thought 'Thank god, I don't do this', I want you to reconsider. The truth is, you're doing this in some form or another. If it's not Ramadan, it's confusing something else about me. You are doing this in some form, because White Supremacy is systemic and inherent in our communities. And it translates into every personal interaction you have with me, even the ones with positive intention.

So, what is the next step then? There is no cookie cutter solution. Start by reflecting on how you question folks about their faith, even if it is in the name of inclusivity.