

Vision of Race Unity: America's Most Challenging Issue

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Racism is the most challenging issue confronting America. A nation whose ancestry includes every people on earth, whose motto is E pluribus unum, whose ideals of freedom under law have inspired millions throughout the world, cannot continue to harbor prejudice against any racial or ethnic group without betraying itself. Racism is an affront to human dignity, a cause of hatred and division, a disease that devastates society.

Notwithstanding the efforts already expended for its elimination, racism continues to work its evil upon this nation. Progress toward tolerance, mutual respect, and unity has been painfully slow and marked with repeated setbacks. The recent resurgence of divisive racial attitudes, the increased number of racial incidents, and the deepening despair of minorities and the poor make the need for solutions ever more pressing and urgent. To ignore the problem is to expose the country to physical, moral and spiritual danger.

Aware of the magnitude and the urgency of the issue, we, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, speaking for the entire U.S. Bahá'í community, appeal to all people of goodwill to arise without further delay to resolve the fundamental social problem of this country. We do so because of our feeling of shared responsibility, because of the global experience of the Bahá'í community in affecting racial harmony within itself, and because of the vision that the sacred scriptures of our Faith convey of the destiny of America.

I

The oneness of humanity is the pivot round which revolve all the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. It is at once a statement of principle and an assertion of the ultimate goal of human experience on the planet. More than a century ago, Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the

Bahá'í Faith, wrote: "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established." It is a principle that issues naturally from the genesis and purpose of human existence. The Word of God as presented in the Bahá'í writings offers compelling insights as in the following examples:

Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.

Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory.

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. The Almighty beareth Me witness: To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth.

Having gone through the stages of infancy and turbulent adolescence, humanity is now approaching maturity, a stage that will witness "the reconstruction and demilitarization of the whole civilized world -- a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life." In no other country is the promise of organic unity more immediately demonstrable than in the United States because this country is a microcosm of the diverse populations of the earth. Yet this promise remains largely unrealized even here because of the endemic racism that, like a cancer, is corroding the vitals of the nation.

For too much of its history and in so many places the human race has squandered its energy and resources in futile efforts to prove the unprovable: that one portion of itself, because of separation by geography, a difference in skin color, or the diversity of cultural expression, is intrinsically distinct from another portion. The ignorance and prejudice on which such efforts are founded have led to endless conflicts in the name of the sanctity of tribe, race, class, nation, and religion. Paradoxical as it may seem, in the consistency of these negative efforts across the spectrum of the race, humanity has proved the exact opposite: it has affirmed its oneness. The proof is in the fact that, given the same circumstances, all people, regardless of ethnic or cultural variety, behave essentially the same way. In the futility of its efforts to classify and separate its diverse elements, humanity has become disoriented and confused. Unaided by the divine influence of religion, people are incapable of achieving a proper orientation to their innermost reality and purpose and are thus unable to achieve a coherent vision of their destiny. It is in this respect that the Bahá'ís find relevancy, direction, and fulfillment in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of their Faith.

The oneness of humanity is a spiritual truth abundantly confirmed by science. Recognition of this truth compels the abandonment of all prejudices of race, color, creed, nation, and class -- of "everything which enables people to consider themselves superior to others." The principle of the oneness of humankind" is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope.... It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal.... It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced."

II

The application of the spiritual principle of the oneness of humanity to the life of the nation would necessitate and make possible vast changes in the economic status of the non-white segments of the population. Although poverty afflicts members of all races its victims tend to be largely people of color. Prejudice and discrimination have created a disparity in the standards of living, providing some with excessive economic advantage while denying others the bare necessities for leading healthy and dignified lives. Poor housing, deficient diet, inadequate health care, insufficient education are consequences of poverty that afflict African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanic Americans more than they afflict the rest of the population. The cost to society at large is heavy.

Evidence of the negative effect of racial and ethnic conflict on the economy has prompted a number of businesses and corporations to institute educational programs that teach conflict resolution and are designed to eliminate racial and ethnic tensions from the workplace. These are important steps and should be encouraged. If, however, they are intended primarily to save the economy, no enduring solution will be found to the disastrous consequences of racism. For it cannot suffice to offer academic education and jobs to people while at the same time shutting them out because of racial prejudice from normal social intercourse based on brotherly love and mutual respect. The fundamental solution -- the one that will reduce violence, regenerate and focus the intellectual and moral energy of minorities, and make them partners in the construction of a progressive society -- rests ultimately on the common recognition of the oneness of humankind.

It is entirely human to fail if that which is the most important to people's self-perception is denied them -- namely, the dignity they derive from a genuine regard by others for their stature as human beings. No educational, economic, or political plan can take the place of this essential human need; it is not a need that businesses and schools, or even governments, can provide in isolation from the supportive attitude of society as a whole. Such an attitude needs to be grounded in a spiritual and moral truth that all acknowledge and accept as their own and that, like the oxygen that serves all equally, breathes life into their common effort to live in unity and peace. Absence of the genuine regard for others fostered by such truth causes hopelessness in those discriminated against; and in a state of hopelessness, people lose the coherent moral powers to realize their potential. This vitalizing truth, we are convinced, is summarized in the phrase: the oneness of humankind.

So essential is the principle of the oneness of humanity to the efficacy of educational programs that it cannot be overemphasized. Without its broad influence such programs will not contribute significantly to the development of society. The very fact that businesses are themselves implementing educational programs is indicative of the glaring deficiency of the entire educational system. As we have already said, beyond the mechanisms of education lies the essential prerequisite of a proper attitude on the part of those dispensing curricula and, even more important, on the part of society as a whole. On this basis, education is not only the shortest route out of poverty; it is the shortest route out of prejudice as well. A national program of education, emphasizing the values of tolerance, brotherhood, appreciation for cultures other than one's own, and respect for differences would be a most important step toward the elimination of racism and, as a consequence, the bolstering of the

economy.

III

The persistent neglect by the governing bodies and the masses of the American people of the ravages of racism jeopardizes both the internal order and the national security of the country.

From the day it was born the United States embraced a set of contradictory values. The founding fathers proclaimed their devotion to the highest principles of equality and justice yet enshrined slavery in the Constitution. Slavery poisoned the mind and heart of the nation and would not be abolished without a bloody civil war that nearly destroyed the young republic. The evil consequences of slavery are still visible in this land. They continue to affect the behavior of both Black and White Americans and prevent the healing of old wounds.

Healing the wounds and building a society in which people of diverse backgrounds live as members of one family are the most pressing issues confronting America today. Her peace, her prosperity, and even her standing in the international community depend to a great extent on the resolution of this issue.

That the virulence of the race issue in America attracts the attention of the entire world should spur this country to an unprecedented effort to eliminate every vestige of prejudice and discrimination from her midst. America's example could not fail to have a profound influence on world society nor could it fail to assist the establishment of universal peace. "For the accomplishment of unity between the colored and white," the Bahá'í writings proclaim, "will be a cause of the world's peace."

The responsibility for the achievement of racial peace and unity in the United States rests upon both Black and White Americans. To build a society in which the rights of all its members are respected and guaranteed, both races must be animated with the spirit of optimism and faith in the eventual realization of their highest aspirations. Neither Black nor White Americans should assume that the responsibility for the elimination of prejudice and of its effects belongs exclusively to the other. Both must recognize that unity is essential for their common survival. Both must recognize that there is only one human species. Both must recognize that a harmoniously functioning society that permits the full expression of the potential of all persons can resolve the social and economic problems now

confounding a society wracked with disunity.

It is evident that both Black and White Americans in large numbers are feeling deeply disappointed and frustrated by what each group perceives to be a failure of the efforts in recent decades at effecting progress in the relations between the races. To rationalize this failure, both have been reacting by retreating to the more familiar ground of racial separation. As the problems with crime and drug addiction mount, the tendency is to use the seeming intractability of these problems as a measure of the failure of years of struggle on the part of both to overcome the barriers of centuries. Formidable as is the challenge yet to be met, can it fairly be said that no significant progress has taken place since the days of the sit-ins at lunch counters across the South?

Similarly, the victims of a protracted and entrenched racial discrimination seek relief in the notion that Black Americans, White Americans, American Indians, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans are so distinctly different from one another that all of them must stake out their own cultural and social territories and stay within them. Would this be sensible? Would it not be a retreat from the reality of our common humanity? Would it not be a formula for the total breakdown of civilization? Those who raise the call for separation preach a grim doctrine indeed. If the nation is seriously to submit to such a view, where exactly will either the Black or the White Americans divide their cultural heritage, one from the other?

Racism runs deep. It infects the hearts of both White and Black Americans. Since without conscious, deliberate, and sustained effort, no one can remain unaffected by its corrosive influence, both groups must realize that such a problem can neither easily nor immediately be resolved. "Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left on the fair name of their common country."

Both groups must understand that no real change will come about without close association, fellowship, and friendship among diverse people. Diversity of color, nationality, and culture enhances the human experience and should never be made a barrier to harmonious relationships, to friendship, or to marriage. "O well-loved ones!" Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "The tabernacle of unity has been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch."

IV

Our appeal is addressed primarily to the individual American, because the transformation of a whole nation ultimately depends on the initiative and change of character of the individuals who compose it. No great idea or plan of action by the government or other interested organizations can hope to succeed if the individual neglects to respond in his or her own way as personal circumstances and opportunities permit. And so we respectfully and urgently call upon our fellow Americans of whatever background to look at the racial situation with new eyes and with a new determination to lend effective support to the resolution of a problem that hinders the advance of this great republic toward the full realization of its glorious destiny.

We mention the experience of the Bahá'í community not from any feeling of pride and ultimate victory, because that which we have accomplished still falls short of that to which we aspire; nonetheless, the results to date are most encouraging, and it is as a means of encouragement that we call attention to them.

From its inception in 1863 the Bahá'í community was dedicated to the principle of the unity of humankind. Bahá'ís rely upon faith in God, daily prayer, meditation, and study of sacred texts to effect the transformation of character necessary for personal growth and maturity; however, their aim is to create a world civilization that will in turn react upon the character of the individual. Thus the concept of personal salvation is linked to the salvation, security, and happiness of all the inhabitants of the earth and stems from the Bahá'í belief that "the world of humanity is a composite body" and that "when one part of the organism suffers all the rest of the body will feel its consequence."

Guided and inspired by such principles, the Bahá'í community has accumulated more than a century of experience in creating models of unity that transcend race, culture, nationality, class, and the differences of sex and religion, providing empirical evidence that humanity in all its diversity can live as a unified global society. Bahá'ís see unity as the law of life; consequently, all prejudices are perceived as diseases that threaten life. Rather than considering that the unity of humankind can be established only after other problems afflicting it have been solved, Bahá'ís believe that both spiritual and material development are dependent upon love and unity. Therefore, the Bahá'ís offer the teachings of their Faith and the

example of their community for examination, convinced that these can make a contribution toward the eradication of racism endemic in American society. We do so with firm faith in the assistance of our Creator, Who, out of His infinite love, brought forth all humanity from the same stock and intended that all belong to the same household. We believe, moreover, that the day of the unification of the entire human race has come and that "the potentialities inherent in the station of man, the innate excellence of his reality, must all be manifested in this promised Day of God."

ADDENDUM

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States is the national administrative body for the Bahá'ís of the United States. The Assembly, has nine members and is elected annually by delegates from the forty eight contiguous states. It directs, coordinates, and stimulates the activities of local Bahá'í administrative bodies and of the 110,000 Bahá'ís in the United States.

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion with adherents in virtually every country. The worldwide Bahá'í community, numbering more than five million, includes almost all nationalities and classes. More than 2,100 ethnic groups and tribes are represented. There are 155 National Spiritual Assemblies.

Bahá'u'lláh was the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. The central principles of His religion are the oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of humanity. His religion "proclaims the necessity and the inevitability of the unification of mankind.... It, moreover, enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth, condemns all manner of prejudice and superstition, declares the purpose of religion to be the promotion of amity and concord, proclaims its essential harmony with science, and recognizes it as the foremost agency for the pacification and the orderly progress of human society. It unequivocally maintains the principle of equal rights, opportunities and privileges for men and women, insists on compulsory education, eliminates extremes of poverty and wealth, abolishes the institution of priesthood, prohibits slavery, asceticism, mendicancy and monasticism, prescribes monogamy, discourages divorce, emphasizes the necessity of strict obedience to one's government, exalts any work performed in the spirit of service to the level of worship, urges

either the creation or the adoption of an auxiliary international language, and delineates the outlines of those institutions that must establish and perpetuate the general peace of mankind."

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