



Although there is no wide agreement as to the "cause" of prejudice and discrimination, there is a consensus that they constitute a learned behavior. The internalization of prejudice starts with parents and, later, teachers--the groups primary in the formation of attitudes within children. The media and social institutions solidify prejudicial attitudes, giving them social legitimacy. In a sense, it is incorrect to speak of "eradicating" prejudice, since prejudice is learned. (In a similar vein, one cannot eradicate evil except by ensuring the presence of goodness.) At best, one can reduce prejudice and discrimination. Society looks most often to education and legislation to alleviate prejudice and discrimination--for reasons still not clearly known, intergroup contact alone is not enough to reduce prejudice (Klineberg, 1968: 441). On one hand, multicultural education, whether direct or indirect, constitute the mainstay of educational efforts to eliminate prejudice. On the other hand, the emphasis on civil rights, enlightened immigration policies, and mandates for quota hiring are the cornerstone of legal approaches to alleviating the effects of prejudice and discrimination. The most overlooked area in resolving the problems of prejudice and discrimination lies in the web of close relationships where genuine feelings of love can be fostered and strengthened (Robert Henderson, American Bahá'í, Nov. 1993 [check].) The private sphere may indeed be the last frontier where a solution to the problems of prejudice may have to be found.

Prejudice and discrimination produce immense effects in the psychological, social, political, and economic domains. Whether intended or not, the effects are compounded by the loss of self-worth, a sense of alienation from the wider society, political disempowerment, and economic inequalities. Klineberg (1968: 440) asserts that "[p]rejudice and ethnic hostilities constitute a major danger to peace both within a nation and among nations." As a consequence, the emergence of a new global moral order increasingly provides a leverage point to counter the effects of prejudice and discrimination. While many agree that the various international instruments to protect people against prejudice and discrimination are still not universally followed or even implemented, it is clear that a new international consciousness is indeed emerging and is, in fact, intensifying.

The Bahá'í Approach. The belief in the unity of humankind constitutes the fundamental premise through which the Bahá'í revelation deals with the question of prejudice and discrimination. `Abdu'l-Bahá states that humanity "is one kind, one race and progeny," and that in "the creative plan [of God] there is no racial distinction and separation." Such separation is a cultural artifact, "not natural and original" (PUP: 118). These statements imply that unity is humankind's natural condition, and that prejudice and discrimination are not part of the natural order. While human diversity has historically proven to be the basis of separation, the Bahá'í writings view diversity as an essential ingredient of global life, which should be appreciated within the context of humanity's essential oneness. Just as it is humanity's capacity to create prejudice and discrimination, it is also within its capacity to eradicate them.

From the Bahá'í perspective, it is religion that gives humanity its capacity to remove prejudice and discrimination. Without religion, according to `Abdu'l-Bahá, we "may be able to realize some degrees of fraternity ... but these are limited associations and subject to change. When human brotherhood is founded upon the Holy Spirit, it is eternal, changeless, unlimited" (PUP: 392).

**Basis and Effects of Prejudice and Discrimination.** The root cause of prejudice and discrimination, according to the Bahá'í writings, lies in the accretion of blind imitation of the past. It is through this "aping of the past," that the "foundations of the social order" are "blown to the four winds," and that "humanity be continually exposed to direst peril" (SWAB: 247). Prejudice and Discrimination lead to disunity which results in the dissolving of society (SWAB: 31), through strife and war. World peace will elude our grasp while prejudice and discrimination continue to bedevil the collective life of humanity (PUP: 373).

The centuries of unequal relationships between dominant and minority groups have, of themselves, compound the difficulty of eradicating prejudice and discrimination. What can be said of the nature of such relationships among whites and blacks in the United States, seems to also apply to other groups around the world. In the Bahá'í view, the dominant groups are unable or unwilling to see discrimination "as a chronic social, psychological, and spiritual illness," while subjugated groups have a "deep-seated mistrust, suspicion, and bitterness" (Racial Unity: 96). Without the recognition of the spiritual nature of the problem, long-term transformation will not occur and social progress of both dominant and subjected groups will be retarded. What effects enduring transformation and progress is recognition of Bahá'u'lláh's divine call for the recognition of the unity of humankind. It implies a rejection of past conceptions, and "blind imitations" of a fragmented world.

The rejection of these "blind imitations" requires, according to Shoghi Effendi (ADJ: 33-34), "ceaseless exertions," "sacrifice," "care and vigilance," "moral courage and fortitude," and "tact and sympathy." Racism in America, for example, should be regarded as constituting the "most vital and challenging issue" facing its Bahá'í community (ADJ: 33-34). For Bahá'ís, the Bahá'í community, both in its internal relationships and in its relationship to the wider world, offers an optimal environment to eradicate prejudice and discrimination.

**Internal Bahá'í Relationships.** There are several elements of Bahá'í communities that foster the removal of prejudice and discrimination from individual and collective life. These elements include an active appreciation of unity in diversity; the encouragement of mixed marriages based on race, religion, or class; the avoidance of strife and estrangement among the believers; the practising of love and unity through fellowship; and promoting justice. Shoghi Effendi offers advice when members of unequal groups have decided to strive towards unity when he suggests that no "trace of mistrust, no sense of superiority, no mark of discord and aloofness should characterize" their relations (Power of

Unity: 76). It is clear that both groups, the dominant and less-dominant ones, carry the obligation to move forward to unity.

At the level of governance, minorities are to be given the preference when, upon the election of a local or national body, a tie of votes occur. This process articulates the "first and inescapable obligation," of every Bahá'í community, "to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it" (ADJ: 35-6).

External Bahá'í Relationships. The First Universal Race Congress in London in 1911, provided a formal opportunity for the presentation of Bahá'ís ideas on the subject of racial unity and fellowship. Unable to come himself, `Abdu'l-Bahá sent a message to the Congress and emphasized the need to appreciate the beauty of humankind's diversity (Racial Unity: 7). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the North American Bahá'í community organized Racial Amity conferences, in conjunction with other groups which strove to eliminate prejudice and discrimination. Bahá'ís in other countries have followed this lead, with varying degrees of effort and intensity. As a consequence, Bahá'ís have focussed the public's attention on the plight of subjugated groups and on the need to provide remedy through the elimination of prejudice and discrimination.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to apply both courage and wisdom in the eradication of prejudice and discrimination in their relationships to society at large. Although intermarriage is encouraged, it is a "highly delicate and vital question," in which the people involved "should forget their former and traditional prejudices, whether religious, racial or social, and commune together on a common basis of equality" (Dawn of a New Civilization: 198).

Efforts to expand the Bahá'í community through conversion should not give preference to any particular category of people. However, Bahá'ís have in many instances undertaken practical measures to foster harmony among various groups. Such measures include the holding of United Nations Human Rights Day, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and International Women's Day, and the promotion of institutional measures design to protect minorities, at both national and international levels.

Nationally, Bahá'ís participate in events and institutions that attempt to reduce discrimination and prejudice and promote harmony. These efforts include the establishment of race amity councils, native friendship centers, and the distribution of specific literature designed to dispell prejudice among the general population. Of note, are the joint efforts of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and the Human Relations Foundation of Chicago in 1991 in finding a model of unity. They identified ignorance, general social forces, and apathy as the principal reasons for resisting intergroup unity. What brought success were commitment to diversity, finding points of common concern, building on shared values, recognizing grass-roots efforts and individual initiative, and networking with similarly-minded groups.

Some Bahá'í communities have urged their national governments to become signatories to international human rights covenants (such as the elimination of genocide).

#### Sources

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#### Bibliography

*The Power of Unity: Beyond Prejudice and Racism* (comp. by Bonnie J. Taylor, 1986) is a useful compilation of the many references in the Bahá'í Writings to prejudice and discrimination.

#### Circle of

*Unity* (ed. by Anthony A. Lee, 1984) has a number of articles that explore race relations in the American Bahá'í community.

#### To Move the

*World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (Gayle Morrison, 1982) is an evocative analysis of the struggles faced by a prominent Bahá'í who worked for the removal of racial prejudice.

Nat Rutstein's book, *To Be One: A Battle Against Racism* (1988), provides a personal account of one's struggle in overcoming prejudice in the light of the Bahá'í teachings.

*Models of Unity: Racial, Ethnic, and Religious* (publ. by US NSA, Feb. 1992) contains findings of factors that hinder or promote social harmony.

Richard W. Thomas' work *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress* currently provides the best analysis of factors that contribute to racial unity, integrating Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í perspectives, while H.B. Danesh's *Unity: The Creative Foundation of Peace* (1986) offers a theoretical treatment of the subject.

Reports submitted by the Bahá'í International Community the various United Nations agencies on the subject of the status of women, racism, genocide, and religious persecution, offer an international perspective of Bahá'í activities.

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