

From the Editor's Desk

JOHN S. HATCHER

STILL THE MOST CHALLENGING ISSUE

When, in 1938, Shoghi Effendi emphatically underscored the necessity of resolving the problem of racism, he made it clear that he was not referring solely to American society, but even more explicitly to the American Bahá'í community: "As to racial prejudice, the corrosion of which, for well-nigh a century, has bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure of American society, it should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution" (*Advent* 33–34).

Of course, a decade or so ago we might have thought that notable progress in race relations had been made, both among American Bahá'ís and in the wider society, and that this caution should no longer be of principal concern. But in recent years with the re-emergence of nationalism and racism—emboldened worldwide by concerns about massive migrations from countries in the grip of prolonged war and chronic poverty—whatever progress we might have thought we had accomplished seems to have come undone. Or maybe much of that progress was merely a chimera. Perhaps these

pernicious attitudes were simply lying low, temporarily cowed by public disapproval but just waiting for the right moment and some shift in political discourse to re-emerge, to give voice to their animus, and to demonstrate their bigotry through impassioned words and violent actions.

It is reasonable to assume that what might seem to be the reawakening of racism is really the increased awareness of what was already extant but merely awaiting a forum—such as social media—to become reorganized, and a resurgent nationalism resulting from massive immigration to create a wider audience for its message. In other words, we can presume racism was never really abolished but merely lying low and waiting for a shift in public sentiment. Consequently, it is clearer than ever that the solution to racism is not to ignore it—as if, starved of attention, it will go away when we simply don't talk about it and, instead, go about our lives as Bahá'ís and good citizens. Indeed, it becomes clear upon further consideration of Shoghi Effendi's discussion of this theme that all races must give vital attention to this "issue of paramount importance" until substantive change occurs. He notes that "the sacrifices it must impose, the care and vigilance it demands, the moral courage and fortitude it requires, the tact and sympathy it necessitates, invest this problem, which the American believers are still far from having satisfactorily resolved, with an urgency and importance that cannot be overestimated" (*Advent* 34).

To appreciate fully his emphasis on this issue, we need to realize that all other progress toward creating unified communities throughout the world is necessarily predicated on the recognition that—even as contemporary science confirms—race is a distinction of perception—a social construct not based on any essential difference. It is, as it were, a virulent social fiction capable of undermining and dismantling the very fabric and foundation of society. Every social and political experiment to the contrary—whether as gross as slavery, as unjust as apartheid, or as subtle but underhanded as prejudicial appropriations for healthcare, education, and other social programs—eventually crumbles under the weight of its own injustice. And why? Because spiritual verities are not merely personal and private axioms—they describe the laws of reality, which, when violated, reap material and social consequences.

From a more encompassing perspective, we can appreciate that Bahá'ís sincerely believe that this era in human history—the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh—will usher in the maturation and subsequent unification of humankind so long prophesied by previous divine revelations. Consequently, Bahá'ís are the vanguard tasked with manifesting that maturity by rehearsing the practices for establishing a global framework at the personal and community levels. Or, in terms of the anthropological theory of the human race as having emerged out of Africa

to spread about the world—thereby acquiring various colors and features to adapt to Earth's different climes—our present mandate from Bahá'u'lláh signifies that our coming together for a family reunion portends our simultaneous re-emergence as a single race once again.

And it is rather logical that this idea of the racial harmony of humankind is not merely some poetic trope symbolizing the unity derived from mutual kindness and acceptance we hope to attain as a global civilization. It seems clear, rather, that as we commingle, intermarry, and, in time, scatter about the globe freely without the present nationalistic, territorial, and tribal constraints, we will over time quite literally obliterate the more obvious external distinctions that presently cause us to assign to those who are distinct from ourselves the various epithets and euphemisms symbolizing “the other.” And quite possibly this blending is a beginning expression of the apparent literalism with which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá prophesies that during the efflorescence of this age, “all men will adhere to one religion . . . will be blended into one race, and become a single people” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 315). This same thought is reiterated in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prayer that “the perilous darkness of ignorant prejudice may vanish through the light of the Sun of Truth, this dreary world may become illumined, this material realm may absorb the rays of the world of spirit, these different colors may merge into one color and the

melody of praise may rise to the kingdom of Thy sanctity" (qtd. in *Bahá'í Prayers* 114).

Of course, we would do well in our vision of this utopian prophecy to appreciate that unity implies neither sameness nor, on the social level, a dystopian leveling of society where there is no distinction of appearances, capacities, skills, or other forms of differentiation, whether individually or collectively. On the contrary, there will always remain in society—however spiritually advanced it may become, however intellectually enlightened and similar in racial characteristics—the need for an infinite variety of personalities, capacities, and interests, even if we manage to eliminate the vast stratification derived from circumstantial conditions of appearance, wealth, or class.

Even as the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States recognizes that confronting racism—both within and without the Bahá'í community—is the *sine qua non* for the strategic advancement of the Bahá'í community in America and for the progress of American society as a whole, so the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in this issue, and in succeeding issues, is giving due attention to discourses about race and racism, as well as paying tribute to those African-American Bahá'í scholars and leaders who were at the forefront of making a difference by daring to confront and overcome those forces that might have stifled or deterred people of lesser caliber and courage.

Perhaps one of the most powerful statements about the impact of racism is found in an image used by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that is seemingly simple and easy to comprehend, but is packed with meaning. In writing to an African-American Bahá'í, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, employing a metaphor He elsewhere attributes to Bahá'u'lláh, says the following: "O thou who art pure in heart, sanctified in spirit, peerless in character, beauteous in face! Thy photograph hath been received revealing thy physical frame in the utmost grace and the best appearance. Thou art dark in countenance and bright in character. Thou art like unto the pupil of the eye which is dark in colour, yet it is the fount of light and the revealer of the contingent world" (*Selections* 114).

As 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes elsewhere, "the blackness of the pupil of the eye is due to its absorbing the rays of the sun, for if it were another colour—say, uniformly white—it would not absorb these rays" (*Some Answered Questions* 49:5). Of course, "light" in the Bahá'í scriptures almost invariably symbolizes knowledge or, more aptly, enlightenment. In this sense, people of color can be seen as providing guidance and insight for the body of humankind. And considering the history of suffering, deprivation, and injustice that African Americans have been made to endure—and are still experiencing—we can well appreciate how such a history produces a wariness and a wisdom that are coupled with a deep comprehension of the subtle underpinnings that must become the foundation for social justice and racial harmony.

Toward that end, we begin this issue with a most enlightened and enlightening discussion by Derik Smith, "Centering the 'Pupil of the Eye': Blackness, Modernity and the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh." In addition to providing expansive examination of this same metaphor, Smith does a superb job of dealing with both the history of the problem of racism and, in particular, how it has actually become exacerbated and consolidated in the modern age. He notes, "Indeed, it can be argued that blackness is nothing more, and nothing less, than the stigma that modernity has projected onto people deemed to be its most 'antonymic and problematic others.'" He goes on to explain, "If blackness was conjured in modernity's effort to fragment humanity, and marginalize those bearing its mark, Bahá'u'lláh's metaphor alters the meaning of blackness, drawing it to the center of the body of humanity." Smith then concludes by demonstrating that "Bahá'u'lláh's specific and explicit refutation of one of modernity's most hateful and divisive social ideologies [racism] is an instructive prescription addressed to all humanity."

Following Smith's excellent discourse is an article by Christopher Buck that introduces three particular talks by one of the major figures in African-American history, Alain Locke—a Bahá'í, a Rhodes Scholar, and a major force in bringing about the Harlem Renaissance. In "Alain Locke's 'Moral Imperatives for World Order' Revisited," Buck presents the speeches

delivered at a 1944 conference by this distinguished Bahá'í philosopher and demonstrates their relationship to, and possibly their influence by, Locke's knowledge of Bahá'í teachings.

We have included two of the first in an ongoing series of life sketches about some of those stellar African-American scholars who blazed trails that guide us still. The two individuals we have chosen for this issue are Hand of the Cause of God Louis Gregory and Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Elsie Austin. We also include two powerful sonnets, "Pen and Ink" by Shirin Sabri and "Viburnum Lantana" by Gary Hogensen.

It is also with delight we feature for the first time in our cover art a poignant and thematically relevant work by Bahá'í artist Michèle Jubilee.