

## **Race Unity: Implications for the Metropolis**

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### **Abstract**

This article briefly reviews some of the universal principles of unity which apply to the metropolis, whether that metropolis is Sarajevo, San Juan, or San Francisco. It then summarizes, for four distinct time periods during the twentieth century, some of the major ways in which racial disunity has been imprinted upon the metropolitan landscape in the United States. For each era, more social attention to specific Bahá'í teachings could have played a significant role in reducing fragmentation. The article ends by summarizing some of the major spiritual principles necessary to improve the fragmented metropolis, in the United States, and around the world.

### **Résumé**

Le présent article passe rapidement en revue certains principes spirituels universels d'unité applicables à la métropole, qu'il s'agisse de la métropole de Sarajevo, de San Juan ou de San Francisco. L'article résume ensuite, pour quatre périodes distinctes du vingtième siècle, quelques-uns des principaux moyens par lesquels la division raciale est venue perturber le paysage métropolitain aux Etats-Unis. A chaque période, la fragmentation aurait pu être réduite en attirant l'attention sur le plan social a des enseignements bahá'ís particuliers. L'article se termine en résumant certain des grands principes spirituels requis pour améliorer la métropole fragmentée, aux Etats-Unis comme ailleurs a travers le monde.

### **Resumen**

Este artículo hace reseña sobre los principios universales de la unidad en lo que atañe a la metrópolis, sea esta Sarajevo, San Juan, o San Francisco. Sigue a hacer un conciso, durante cuatro periodos que resaltan durante el siglo veinte, sobre las formas principales en que la desunión racial se ha grabado en el paisaje metropolitano de los Estados Unidos. En cada periodo, mas atención social a las enseñanzas bahá'í del caso hubiera podido ser clave en pos de disminuir la fragmentación. El artículo termina hacienda compendia de los principios espirituales principales necesarios para mejorar la metrópolis fragmentada, sea en Estados Unidos o en el resto del mundo.

O my God! I ask Thee, by Thy most glorious Name, to aid me in that which will cause the affairs of Thy servants to prosper, and Thy cities to flourish. Thou, indeed, hast power over all things!

—Bahá'u'lláh

People in every sector of the globe must rectify some situation now causing strife, in order to move toward a state of unity and harmony. The most difficult such challenge in the Middle East or Great Britain may be religious conflict. In sub-Saharan Africa or Bosnia the challenge may be ethnic rivalries; in Eastern Europe or Guatemala, national or political rivalries; in North America or South Africa, racial disunity. In each case, the major tasks are to understand which divine laws and

principles operate in that sphere of influence, to identify the barriers to implementing those principles, and to move toward social healing.

In North America, the challenge of racial disunity is particularly strong because the region's history has included slavery, legal racial segregation, and ongoing racism, which "retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts its perpetrators, and blights human progress" (Universal House of Justice, quoted in *Power of Unity* 36). It will take special effort to overcome this history, in part because racial disunity has become entangled with the fiber of the contemporary American metropolis. Just by choosing where to live, people may reinforce patterns of racial oppression.

This is true because prejudice has received semi-permanent status in the physical realm of concrete, brick, and asphalt. Racial disunity has affected where people live and work in the present, but in the past determined where houses and businesses were built, where municipalities were formed, how fast cities were abandoned. Even in the future when people forsake prejudiced behavior, the physical effects of past decisions will linger. This places an important obligation upon those who wish their lives to exemplify the principles of racial unity.

This article will briefly review some of the universal principles of unity which apply to the metropolis, whether that metropolis is Sarajevo, San Juan, or San Francisco. It will then demonstrate how racial disunity has been imprinted upon the North American metropolitan landscape, specifically in the United States, and explain how Bahá'í teachings could have helped prevent much of the current fragmentation. The article will end by arguing that metropolitan citizens face special spiritual obligations if they would promote unity.

## **Principles of Unity: Geographic Implications**

Basic spiritual principles, because they apply to humans as a species, do not change according to region, culture, or nation. A basic spiritual principle is that humanity is intrinsically one and that all barriers among human beings are artificial and without foundation. This concept is expressed forcefully in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, who proclaimed that "the incomparable Creator hath created all men from one same substance, and hath exalted their reality above the rest of His creatures" (*Gleanings* 81). Equality is divinely ordained among human beings, and this equality is as fundamental as is human superiority to other earthly creatures. 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that "God, the Almighty, has created all mankind from the dust of earth. He has fashioned them all from the same elements; they are descended from the same race and live upon the same globe. He has created them to dwell beneath the one heaven. As members of the human family and His children He has endowed them with equal susceptibilities" (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 297). No justification exists for one human being to feel superior to another because of race, creed, or nationality, since God made all humanity out of the same basic elements, components, and characteristics.

The Bahá'í teachings suggest that recognition of this fundamental unity is far from a passive process. Of particular note is a series of exhortations which suggest that unity requires effort and interaction. In one passage, Bahá'u'lláh called for the "Children of Men" to understand that "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." In a remarkable series of images, the spiritual student is bidden to do the seemingly impossible: to meld souls, share feet and mouths, and dwell together,

in order to make unity apparent and obtain “the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory” (*Hidden Words* 20).

In another passage, Bahá'u'lláh promised that all of the earth's inhabitants could live in harmony, as if in one city. But it was a conditional promise; in order to live in such a world, human beings are counselled to “set [their] faces towards unity. . . . Gather ye together, and . . . resolve to root out whatever is the source of contention amongst you. Then will the effulgence of the world's great Luminary envelop the whole earth, and its inhabitants become the citizens of one city” (*Gleanings* 217).

‘Abdu'l-Bahá provided additional guidance about the need to “gather ye together”; this should be, he noted, “in extreme kindliness and love” (*Selections* 20), characterized by a spirit of brotherhood. This, he noted, had a specific purpose: “Human brotherhood and dependence exist because mutual helpfulness and cooperation are the two necessary principles underlying human welfare” (*Promulgation* 150). “This is physical fellowship which ensures material happiness in the human world. The stronger it becomes, the more will mankind advance and the circle of materiality be enlarged” (*Promulgation* 129).

These images and exhortations strongly suggest physical proximity. To a certain extent such proximity is symbolic—certainly it is not possible for one person to “gather” physically with all the peoples of the world. Spiritually, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá counsels, one should identify with the globe, since “the earth has one surface. God has not divided this surface by boundaries and barriers to separate races and peoples. Man has set up and established these imaginary lines, giving to each restricted area a name and the limitation of a native land or nationhood.” Yet the concept of unity has more than symbolic global implications. When geographic boundaries function as “imaginary lines” that divide unnecessarily, they violate the spiritual principle of unity. Therefore, since artificial boundaries have become a “source of war and strife. . . . it has been decreed by God in this day that these prejudices and differences shall be laid aside” (*Promulgation* 316).

The need to “eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land” and associate in loving fellowship clearly indicates the importance of overcoming physical barriers, but how is this possible? One way is to insure that each social and geographic unit reflects the unity that must characterize the world. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá explains this concept by beginning with the family:

Note ye how easily, where unity existeth in a given family, the affairs of that family are conducted; what progress the members of that family make, how they prosper in the world. Their concerns are in order, they enjoy comfort and tranquillity, they are secure, their position is assured, they come to be envied by all. (*Selections* 279)

He continues by suggesting that the sphere then widens to the village and the city:

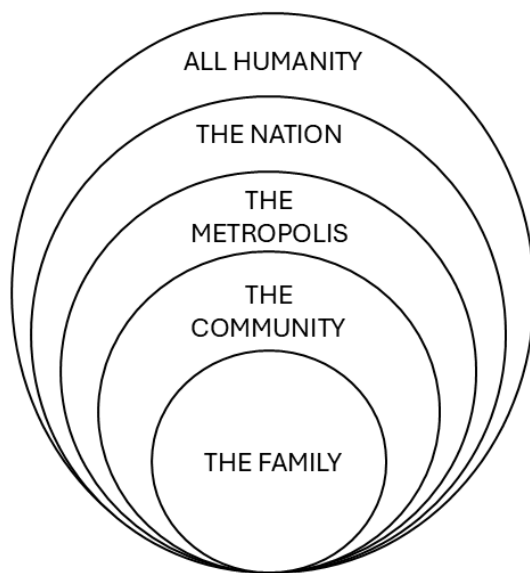
And if we widen out the sphere of unity a little to include the inhabitants of a village . . . what great advances they will be seen to make, how secure and protected they will be. Then let us widen out the sphere a little more, let us take the inhabitants of a city, all of them together: if they establish the strongest bonds of unity among themselves, how far they will progress. (279)

Furthermore, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá suggests, if the inhabitants of a whole country develop peaceable hearts, “if they become kind and loving to one another, that country will achieve undying joy and lasting glory.” The image presented within the full passage is of a concentric circle of unity:

Note then: if every clan, tribe, community, every nation, country, territory on earth should come together under the single-hued pavilion of the oneness of mankind . . . what would happen then? There is no doubt whatsoever that the divine Beloved, in all His endearing beauty, and with Him a massive host of heavenly confirmations and human blessings and bestowals, would appear in His full glory before the assemblage of the world. (279–80)

Figure 1 presents one image of the sequential nature of this concept translated into metropolitan terms: unity must pervade every geographic sphere, in order to insure the progress of the world. This would imply that the family should be unified, but so too should the community, the metropolis, the nation, the world.

**Figure 1: A Geographic Model of Unity**



Last but certainly not least, the Bahá'í writings suggest that religion is the best way to bring about unity. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "the perfect means for engendering fellowship and union is true religion" (*The Secret of Divine Civilization* 73). Using as an example the racial problem in the United States, he noted: "There is no greater means to bring about affection between the white and the black than the influence of the Word of God" (*Power* 69). In this view, religion lets human beings focus on their spiritual connections, rather than their physical differences and barriers; therefore "true religion"—that is, religion characterized by truth as opposed to prejudice and blind tradition—is the cause of unity, not conflict.

The reality of society stands in marked contrast to the spiritual laws described above. In many nations, the metropolis is the battleground for the clash of cultures, races, classes, and even religions, rather than a miniature "single-hued pavilion" of the oneness of humanity. The most extreme examples are the most tragic: Berlin, divided for more than forty years by barbed wire, brick walls, and rifle fire; Sarajevo, where Serbs and Croats associated freely in times of peace but burned bridges between ethnic sectors during times of bloody war; Johannesburg and Soweto,

artificially separated to maintain apartheid, where unauthorized travel into forbidden territory was, for many years, punishable by imprisonment; and present-day Jerusalem's Old City, where Muslims, Christians, and Jews live in separate enclaves and where walking out of one's own enclave during tense times can be a foolhardy and dangerous act. These metropolitan situations all violate the spiritual principles of geographic unity. But so too do the less extreme examples.

### **Racial Disunity and the North American Metropolis**

North America's metropolitan areas are not the most extreme example of geographic disunity. Nevertheless, the situation in that area of the globe is particularly important to understand because of the special role that America's race relations play in the unity of the planet. 'Abdu'l-Bahá warned that America's failure to unite would prove devastating:

the enmity and hatred which exist between the white and the black races is very dangerous and there is no doubt that it will end in bloodshed unless the influence of the Word of God, the breaths of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are diffused amongst them and harmony is established between the two races. (*Power* 31)

In contrast, however, the alternative was glorious: "When the racial elements of the American nation unite in actual fellowship and accord, the lights of the oneness of humanity will shine, the day of eternal glory and bliss will dawn" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 57). Furthermore, unity among races will be "an assurance of the world's peace" (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice* 39).

When Shoghi Effendi wrote to the North American Bahá'í community in 1938, in a series of letters entitled *The Advent of Divine Justice*, he listed eliminating racial prejudice as one of three basic requirements for members of that community, ranking with "rectitude of conduct" (*Advent* 26) and "absolute chastity in their individual lives" (22). In fact, to underscore the importance of these three requirements, he warned that "the measure of the manifold blessings which the All-Bountiful Possessor can vouchsafe to them" depends upon "the extent to which these basic requirements are met, and the manner in which the American believers fulfill them" (22). Yet many North Americans are unaware of how perniciously racial prejudice affects everyday lives. Without specific education, even those most dedicated to eliminating prejudice may unconsciously contribute to its perpetuation.

American racism is, in large part, a metropolitan problem. Putting this another way, American racial disunity is tied to the shape and structure of the modern metropolis. Before this century, slavery was the formative institution that engendered racism in the West. That period imprinted the consciousness of Americans, shaping their basic social, economic, and political institutions (R. Thomas, *Racial Unity*). Poor race relations permeated American society, hindering efforts to bring about social progress nationwide, in all spheres of activity. While at some level, therefore, racial disunity knows all geographic levels, it is tied to metropolitan development in particularly strong ways. This has been true throughout the twentieth century and will probably be true well into the twenty-first century.

While it is impossible to cite more than a fraction of the urban scholars who have written about the connections between race and the metropolis, some of the most well known include W. E. B. DuBois, St. Clair Drake, and Horace Cayton, who studied the effects of racial segregation upon African-American urban life in early twentieth-century Philadelphia and Chicago; Gilbert

Osofsky and Arnold Hirsch, who explained the consequences of creating black ghettos and public housing enclaves in New York City and Chicago; and William Julius Wilson, who conclusively demonstrated that urban spatial fragmentation continues to burden black urban residents in the nation’s largest and oldest cities.<sup>1</sup> The sum weight of the work of these and other scholars suggests that American race relations should be understood in the context of the metropolis.

During every phase of the twentieth century, American society violated the spiritual principles of unity in the metropolis by taking progressive steps toward metropolitan disunity. Many actions seemed harmless enough, intended perhaps to improve urban life in some general sense. But other actions were deliberate efforts to enforce segregation and oppression, either by race or by income. Table 1 summarizes some of the actions that created today’s racially fragmented metropolis. For each era, Bahá’í teachings addressed specifically those actions that needed to be taken to promote racial unity.

***Formative Years***

The process began in the early part of the century, when local politicians and planners began to design the tools necessary to separate classes and races of people. During that period, large U.S. cities experienced waves of foreign immigrants as well as one of the first large influxes of African-Americans. Blacks came to cities from the rural South, pushed off the land by changes in the agrarian sector and pulled to cities by urban: job opportunities during World War I. One overwhelming preoccupation of a budding group of city planners and urban managers, in reaction to these population changes, was to “protect” one class of people from another. In San Francisco, this meant insuring that Chinese laundries could only be located in some regions of the city; in Manhattan, separatists wanted to insulate wealthy Fifth A venue patrons from working-class garment-district workers. In Southern cities, an important motive was to make sure African-Americans did not live near white Americans.

**Table 1. Chronology of the Racially Divided Metropolis, Twentieth-Century U.S.A.**

<b>TIME PERIOD</b>	<b>RESTRICTIVE TOOL [OR EFFECT]</b>
1910–1930s Formative Years	Zoning Restrictive Covenants Home Rule Legislation
1930s–1950s World War II Era	Public Housing Policies Subdivision Controls Urban Renewal Policies Anti-black Riots
1960s–1970s U.S. Civil Activism	Suburban Exclusion Lack of Open Housing Enforcement [Minority Poverty] [Black Riots]

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<sup>1</sup> DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*; Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*; Osofsky, *Harlem*; Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged*.

1980s–1990s  
Contemporary Era

Housing Discrimination  
[Suburban Hegemony]  
[Racially Divided Metropolis]  
[Poverty Effects]

The first tool developed to enforce such segregation was zoning, a legality borrowed from the Germans. Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1917 that zoning for explicitly racial categories was unconstitutional, after 1926 the court issued a series of decisions that allowed municipalities to separate commercial and industrial areas, to segment residential uses according to size and affordability, and to permit racially restrictive covenants. Zoning soon evolved into an informal means of keeping the races separate and a formal means of stratifying income groups (Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City*; Silver, *Twentieth-Century Richmond*; J. Thomas, “Planning History and the Black Urban Experience”).

Restrictive covenants proved to be an even more direct way of insuring racial segregation. Racially restrictive covenants were private contracts in which home owners agreed not to sell or rent to African-Americans, Jews, or other “undesirables.” In effect, white home owners agreed to sell only to white home owners. In 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that law enforcement agencies could not legally enforce racially restrictive covenants, but the ruling did not prohibit home owners from continuing to use them (Silver, *Twentieth-Century Richmond*; Vose, *Caucasians Only*).

In another movement of significance, state legislatures, especially in the North, began to limit annexation and allow municipal home rule. While these actions did not appear to have racial significance at first, they did in the long run. During this period, state legislatures insured that a small group of citizens could easily create a separate municipality, without being annexed to larger cities. The eventual result: metropolitan areas formed that contained a multitude of individual, homogeneous polities, sometimes numbering in the hundreds. Several northern central cities stopped growing during this era, never again able to expand through annexation or consolidation. Instead they became trapped, surrounded by prosperous (and white) middle-class growth, but unable to capture fleeing tax bases.<sup>2</sup>

It was during this period that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá came to visit the United States in his role as head of the Bahá’í Faith. His visit took place in 1912, just before the wave of World War I immigrants, and a few years before several U.S. Supreme Court rulings on zoning and covenants. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá delivered a series of talks to various audiences within the United States.

On several occasions these audiences were racially mixed, which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often commented upon and indicated was a source of great personal joy. He declared, during an April, 1912, talk at Howard University in Washington, D.C., that “today I am most happy, for I see here a gathering of the servants of God. I see white and black sitting together.” He then stated unequivocally, “there are no whites and blacks before God. All colors are one, and that is the color of servitude to God. . . . today I am very happy that white and black have gathered together in this meeting. I hope this coming together and harmony reaches such a degree that no distinctions shall remain between them” (*Promulgation* 44–45).

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<sup>2</sup> This situation, some scholars believe, is one of the most important reasons for the stagnant economies of northern U.S. cities. See Rusk, *Cities without Suburbs*, for a full explanation of this phenomenon. For an account of the City of Detroit’s futile attempts to break out of its municipal boundaries after the 1920s, see J. Thomas, *Planning A Finer City*, chapter 2.

On another occasion, also in Washington, D.C., the man known to the Bahá'ís as the Center of the Covenant compared the racially mixed audience to “a beautiful cluster of precious jewels—pearls, rubies, diamonds, sapphires. It is a source of joy and delight” (*Promulgation* 56). Another favorite image ‘Abdu’l-Bahá used during this series of U.S. talks was of “the variegated beauty of flowers in a garden” (*Promulgation* 68). His clear preference for racially mixed audiences was particularly telling because at that time whites often refused to sit with non-whites in public places, particularly in southern or border states (R. Thomas, *Racial Unity* 122–25).

Principles that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stressed throughout various talks were the same that his father, Bahá'u'lláh, had taught. One basic principle was the essential oneness of humanity; another was the need for nonsegregated association. At the same time, American urban society was poised at the point of placing into law the tools necessary to keep the races apart. Although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá warned that the races must become united or else “enmity will be increased day by day, and the final result will be hardship and may end in bloodshed” (quoted in *Advent* 33) America was not listening. The Bahá'í community, however, tried to live the principles of racial unity so clearly laid out by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.<sup>3</sup>

Table 2 shows that, for this first era, the two spiritual principles of oneness and nonsegregation offered a potential counterweight to the tools of discrimination.

**Table 2: Metropolitan Restriction vs. a Metropolitan Race Unity Agenda**

<b>TIME PERIOD</b>	<b>RESTRICTIVE TOOL [OR EFFECT]</b>	<b>KEY OPERATIONAL SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE</b>
1910–1930s Formative Years	Zoning Restrictive Covenants Home Rule Legislation	Recognition of Oneness of Humanity Nonsegregated Association
1930s–1950s World War II Era	Public Housing Subdivision Controls Urban Renewal Anti-Black Riots	Geographic Unity No Discrimination Favor Minority Open Association
1960s–1970s US Civil Activism	Suburban Exclusion Lack of Open Housing Enforcement [Minority Poverty] [Riots]	Geographic Unity No Prejudice or Discrimination Alleviate Poverty Recruit Racial Minorities
1980s-1990s Contemporary Era	Housing Discrimination [Suburban Hegemony] [Racially Divided Metropolis] [Poverty Effects]	No Prejudice or Discrimination Geographic Unity Geographic Unity

<sup>3</sup> It is not the purpose of this short article to detail the response of the Bahá'í community to this and subsequent eras; the reader can refer to Richard Thomas, *Racial Unity*, for a full account. In general, the Bahá'í community, while not a perfect exemplar of the teachings on racial unity, carried them out to a far greater extent than did the larger society. For example, the Washington, D.C. Bahá'í community held separate meetings for part of this period but discontinued this practice as instructed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In subsequent years, including during the World War II era, the Bahá'í community sponsored many race unity conferences, picnics, and other public events.



		Alleviate Poverty and Extremes of Wealth and Poverty
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### ***World War II Era***

The World War II era, from the 1930s to 1950s, compels one to ask: How could a people so blindly pursue an agenda of racial disunity? For it was during this time period that a combination of deliberate policies insured that the American metropolis would become racially fragmented.

Public housing began as a well-meant attempt to provide low-income housing for people of all races, including formerly middle-class whites devastated by the Great Depression. Those who fought for the 1937 legislation that set up the program often had noble character and intentions. In city after city, however, officials used the public-housing program as a tool for keeping the races separate. In cities such as Chicago and Detroit, this often meant building monolithic, multistoried public-housing units in the black ghetto, to warehouse the poor and “protect” middle-class areas from lower-class blacks. Far from accidental, the segregated housing placement strategy was conscious and intentional.<sup>4</sup>

Another tool for exclusion kept housing subdivisions racially homogeneous. During and after World War II, two federal mortgage insurance programs (the Federal Housing Administration [FHA] and the Veterans Administration [VA]), the return of war veterans, and highway construction all fueled booming growth in suburban settlements. The FHA and VA steadfastly refused to insure mortgages in neighborhoods with any African-Americans present, no matter how good the quality of housing. They favored new subdivisions and advised their staff to make sure that approved properties “continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes” (Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* 208). One practical effect of these actions was to close new subdivisions to African-American home buyers; another was to discourage residential racial integration of any kind.<sup>5</sup>

Urban renewal was yet another policy tool that controlled residence by race. With this program, cities across the U.S. cleared out African-American neighborhoods, replacing them with hospitals or universities, commercial districts, or higher-income housing. While in some cases this improved the income and racial mixture of the inner city, in most cases it forced African-Americans into more crowded ghettos, escalating the climate of hopelessness and despair (Bauman, *Public Housing*).

Ignominiously, some white urban residents also carried out a series of “riots.” Riots during this era were periodic rampages used to kill African-American people and pillage their homes. This tool had been used throughout the previous century and during times such as the East St. Louis riot of 1917, but it gained additional notoriety during the 1940s with the infamous 1943 race

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<sup>4</sup> See Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, for an exhaustive account of public housing placement in Chicago. The City of Detroit kept two lists of public housing tenants, white and black, from the early 1940s until the mid-1950s, and had an official policy of refusing to change the existing racial mixture of a neighborhood. Hence those public-housing projects located near the center of the city became the only ones available to blacks. See J. Thomas, *Planning a Finer City*, chapters 2, 4.

<sup>5</sup> These policies sometimes led to ridiculous results. In the City of Detroit, for example, the FHA refused to approve loans for a new “white” subdivision in the northern part of the city, because it was located too closely to an historic black settlement (Eight Mile-Wyoming). The white subdivision developer then built a wall between the black and white areas. Then the FHA approved his loan request (J. Thomas, *Planning a Finer City*).

riots in Detroit. Less spectacular incidents also reinforced the climate of violence. Some whites waged a surreptitious strategy of “guerilla warfare,” harassing new African-American neighbors by damaging their property, burning crosses on their lawns, or verbally intimidating their families (Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*; Hirsch, *Second Ghetto*).

Just as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offered spiritual guidance that would have countered the movement toward segregation in the 1920s, Shoghi Effendi offered direction that would have prevented many of the trends that took place in the 1940s and 1950s. In his 1938 *Advent of Divine Justice* letters, directed to the American Bahá’í community, he explained several principles necessary for effecting racial unity.

One was to avoid discrimination against any race, which he called “a flagrant violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh.” In fact, “if any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favor of the minority, be it racial or otherwise” (*Advent* 35). Furthermore, he bade American Bahá’ís to give up any sense of racial prejudice and cultivate free association “through the various and everyday opportunities, no matter how insignificant, that present themselves, whether in their homes, their business offices, their schools and colleges, their social parties and recreation grounds, their Bahá’í meetings, conferences, conventions” (*Advent* 36). These guidelines joined with well-established Bahá’í principles such as the oneness of humanity and, as indicated on Table 2, the concept of geographic unity.

If the spirit of such actions had pervaded American society, the determined actions of the FHA to keep the races separate, and of city public housing authorities to isolate the black poor, would have not taken place. If the concept of favoritism for the minority had prevailed, the worst ills of urban renewal would have been prevented. And the shameless series of anti-black riots and guerilla tactics would have been impossible.

### ***U.S. Civil Activism***

Some things improved during the 1960s and 1970s, but much damage had already been done. Suburbs were becoming increasingly popular but increasingly homogeneous, while inner-city racial ghettos continued to fester and confine. Discriminatory tools that died away included racially restricted covenants. Public housing changed as enlightened new policies encouraged subsidized housing mixed with market-rate housing, and the FHA ceased blatant racial discrimination. But rather than use racial zoning, FHA policies, or restrictive covenants, cities and suburbs tolerated more subtle racial discrimination. As indicated in Table 1, suburban exclusion and lack of open housing were common. And so the problem remained.

Many suburbs simply used informal means to keep out people of color. In the Detroit metropolitan area, one well-known suburban politician built his reputation on his ability to keep African-Americans from living in his city. He did this by publicly pronouncing that they were unwelcome, by encouraging white home owners and real estate agents to snub potential black residents, and by directing police to harass them (Darden, et al., *Detroit* 119–25; Good; *Orvie*). Political leadership was not necessary for this process to take place, however. Throughout the country, researchers found extensive refusal by real estate agents to show properties in a colorblind manner, by lending institutions to make mortgage loans without racial discrimination, or by rental unit managers to rent to all applicants, regardless of race. The collective result of these actions was to close suburban doors to African-Americans (Knox, *Urban Social Geography* 165–245).

During the 1960s, partially in response to heightened civil activism in the South and the North, the federal government undertook several civil rights initiatives. A 1962 Presidential Executive Order prohibited some housing discrimination, and Congress enacted additional civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1968 (U.S. Congress, *Evolution of the Role*). The limitations of a legislative strategy became evident when the federal government did not enforce the law and people broke it with impunity.

American society confronted its failure to overcome not only racial prejudice and discrimination but also the cumulative effects of income segregation. Its “urban crisis” was much more complex than racial segregation alone; persistent poverty, particularly among urban African-Americans and members of several other oppressed racial minorities, exacted a toll from the nation’s cities. Compared to the poor in the developing world, the U.S. poor were not nearly as destitute; but the difficulty was a crisis of unfulfilled expectations: the American poor began to expect social justice *in relation to* the general prosperity of their nation. The federal government had attempted to launch a “War on Poverty” and then to create “Model Cities,” but initial signs of their success were disappointing.<sup>6</sup> Continued attempts to disperse the minority poor through housing programs or through school busing met stiff resistance in all-white communities.

It was in this context, in the 1960s, that a new type of riot arose. Unlike earlier years, when whites initiated violence, these riots began in black neighborhoods and became identified with black civil rebellion. In spasms of frustration, some African-Americans arose and burned down their own neighborhoods, reacting violently to society’s tendency to lock them up in impoverished, segregated, heavily policed ghettos. Children and innocent bystanders were among those who died in the resulting gunfire (U.S. Kerner Commission, *Report*). Yet again, the blood of innocents was spilled because America had not worked out its racial problems.

The Bahá’í teachings offered important insights about a better way to proceed. We have already explained some of the basic principles of unity, as introduced by Bahá’u’lláh, and expanded by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. These included the abolition of segregation and discrimination, as well as progressive levels of “geographic unity,” open association among the races, and (in certain situations) favoritism toward minorities. Under internal and international pressure, America’s leaders had begun to implement court rulings and create civil rights legislation that dismantled legally sanctioned segregation and discrimination. But concerning the other principles, little progress had been made. The need was for free and loving association, mobility, and openness; the reality was continued segregation, hostility, and conflict.

Some understanding of basic spiritual principles concerning economic problems would also have been helpful during this era. Particularly appropriate would have been some answers to a question that plagued social experts then and now: how do you eliminate poverty? Part of the answer to this question is that to do so is a twofold process, involving a firm sense of social responsibility among the prosperous, on the one hand, and a series of steps designed to support the poor in lives of promise and nobility, on the other. Two “Hidden Words” encapsulate these principles. To the well-to-do, Bahá’u’lláh admonished: “The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.” He advised everyone, including the poor:

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<sup>6</sup> One difficulty with anti-poverty programs was that the nation did not know how to solve social problems; another was that it lost the will to do so. At about the same time that the U.S. launched a campaign against poverty, it also became heavily involved in the war in Vietnam. An account of the shortcomings of the urban social reform programs of this era is available in J. Thomas, *Planning a Finer City*, chapters 6 and 7.

“Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created” (*Hidden Words* 41, 9).<sup>7</sup>

These principles were just as important in the 1960s as they had been in the 1920s and the 1870s. By this time, however, the Bahá’í Faith had lost the physical presence (although not the conceptual guidance) of its central figures; Shoghi Effendi had died in 1957. The Universal House of Justice, the worldwide governing institution established in 1963, picked up the challenge. It clarified the essential components necessary to progress in the area of racial unity in that time period.

As an example of one of its letters, this body noted that “prejudice in its various forms destroys the edifice of humanity. . . . We must not allow the fear of rejection by our friends and neighbors to deter us from our goal: To live the Bahá’í life. Let us strive to blot out from our lives every last trace of prejudice-racial, religious, political, economic, national, tribal, class, cultural, and that which is based on differences of education or age” (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 99–100). The Universal House of Justice also encouraged the American Bahá’ís to recruit racial minorities, particularly African-Americans in the South. In direct contradiction to the prevailing norms of society, their worldwide leaders instructed American Bahá’ís to seek *more* association among peoples of various colors, rather than *less*. This attitude, if adopted universally, would have provided many benefits for the larger society.

### ***Contemporary Era***

The contemporary era has witnessed the marked decline of many of the most overt tools of racial discrimination used to divide metropolitan America. Fair housing and anti-discrimination laws have improved, and more openness has allowed many middle-class African-American families to move to the suburbs. In many ways, however, the challenge of racial unity in the U.S. metropolis has become more difficult, rather than less. This is true largely because of the cumulative effects of the past. As summarized in Table 1, major difficulties of this era include housing discrimination, suburban hegemony, the fragmented metropolis, and poverty effects.

The problem of housing discrimination is a sad testimony to the fact that Americans have not taken the spiritual teachings against prejudice and discrimination to heart. Although such discrimination is clearly illegal, Americans still make negative distinctions against people of color in the housing market, the workplace, and the business world. The studies on housing discrimination are the most extensive, and many are based on a well-established methodology adopted by the federal government to send well-matched pairs of testers of different races to assess differential treatment. These studies suggest that treatment varies by metropolitan area but that racial discrimination in housing markets is a frequent event. Blacks seeking homes for sale, one scholar estimated, “faced a one-in-five chance of discrimination, on average.” Those seeking homes for rent faced a one-in-two chance, as did one-in-three Latinos (Galster, “Racial Discrimination” 172).

The problem is more deeply ingrained than individual prejudice, however. Such prejudice has actually diminished over the past decades, as measured by such indicators as willingness to live in a racially mixed neighborhood (Farley and Frey, “Changes”). Yet the U.S. metropolis reflects the effects of past decisions. In many metropolitan areas, the middle class has largely

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<sup>7</sup> For a fairly complete statement of Bahá’í concepts of social and economic development, see Bahá’í International Community, “The Prosperity of Humankind.” The author has described some of the relationships between spiritual principles concerning poverty and American cities in J. Thomas, “State of the Poor” and “Poverty and Wealth.”

abandoned the central city, leaving blacks and other people of color and low income. The suburbs have become so independent as to lead some authors to suggest that they are new “edge cities” (Garreau, *Edge City*). As society has become more enamored with moving outward, the chances for physical proximity among all peoples has declined precipitously. Because many suburban communities remain largely white, a combination of zoning, subdivision, municipal home rule, exclusionary home sale or rental, and other decisions have made it possible for even prejudice-free whites to become effectively isolated from all but an occasional black family.

Meanwhile, in the city, the population is subject to the debilitating consequences of poverty. These consequences have been most clearly described by William Julius Wilson, who has called them “concentration effects.” To explain this phenomenon simply, the African-American urban population is suffering the bad effects of its increasing concentration in high-poverty areas of central cities. In some ways, the phenomenon is actually worse than it was thirty years ago, because more of the middle class has left. The remaining population may see little hope in the legitimate economy; lacking middle-class role models, some youth may turn instead to drugs, gangs, and crime. These lead to more deterioration, driving more stable, working-class families out, causing greater concentration effects (Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged*).

Thus, the scene is set for metropolitan fragmentation. After the 1990 census, researchers found yet again that the U.S. metropolitan population was severely segregated by race. Although the level of segregation in 1990 decreased slightly in some areas compared with 1980, the index measuring such segregation showed that in the older, more segregated metropolitan areas—Gary, Indiana; Detroit, Michigan; Chicago, Illinois; and Cleveland, Ohio—the level of black residential segregation was over 86 on a 100-point scale. The least segregated metropolitan areas—such as Charlottesville, N.C.; San Jose, California; and Tucson, Arizona—still had levels of 45 on a 100-point scale. A reading of 0 would have indicated no racial segregation (Farley and Frey, “Changes” 15).

Other scholars documented the harmful effects of racial and income segregation. David Rusk, for example, showed that those U.S. metropolitan areas which had fewer municipal governments governing the same geographic area and which had less racial and income segregation, were more prosperous. His widely acclaimed book *Cities without Suburbs* offered a radical idea: Bring the metropolitan areas together in unity. Abolish excessive barriers between central cities and suburbs. Merge into metropolitan governments (Rusk, *Cities without Suburbs*).

All of which demonstrated the importance of the Bahá’í teachings. Rusk’s suggestions were no more innovative than those of Bahá’u’lláh a century earlier, who suggested a complete coming together rather than a growing apart. But this would have to be complete, covering individual prejudice, free association with others, a concern for fellow human beings, a willingness to “dwell in the same land.” These actions were precisely what Americans had not done. Because of the failure to meet these challenges, the tasks grew even more difficult. People grew apart and stayed apart as a matter of inertia if not malice. The central cities decayed as a legacy of racism and social neglect. The “concentration effects” afflicting inner-city populations offered huge barriers to social health and safety. Not only did spiritual teachings on racial unity become imperative; so too did those on wealth and poverty, and social and economic development.

The American Bahá’í community met the challenge of moral leadership by issuing a statement that summarized these concerns. The pronouncements of “The Vision of Race Unity,” which was widely distributed to civic and political leaders, were really quite simple. These were that the well-being of humanity depended on the acceptance of the principle of oneness; that “the persistent neglect by the governing bodies and the masses of the American people of the ravages

of racism jeopardizes both the interlacial order and the national security of the country,” and that “the application of the spiritual principle of the oneness of humanity” “would necessitate and make possible vast changes in the economic status of the non-white segments of the population” (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, “Vision of Race Unity” 7, 5). These basic teachings applied even more urgently to American metropolitan areas than they did to the nation as a whole.

## **Spiritual Obligations**

The lessons to be gained from the U.S. metropolitan experience are many. At a broad level, it is evident that a nation which has made progress in overcoming discrimination and prejudice can still mirror forth the effects of past wrongs. A nation that is characterized by prosperity and freedom for most can still, while giving the “good life” to the many, oppress the few. Metropolitan areas reflect the results of long histories of prejudice and disunity—in the United States racial, but in other nations the conflict could be religious, ethnic, or political—and so they will not be easy to change.

It is sad that it takes humanity so long to heed simple spiritual truths. At every stage of development of the modern U.S. metropolis, the spiritual principles of the oneness of humanity, free association, lack of prejudice and discrimination, openness to minorities, geographic unity, and socioeconomic development could have helped prevent the problems of today. Because these principles were not widely adopted within the population, their effect was stunted. It is still possible, however, to put them to work.

To do so in this particular cultural context will prove difficult. Racial prejudice has been sanitized, depersonalized by the physical environment. Even Bahá’ís, those historic leaders of racial unity efforts, must beware. If a white family moves to a suburb that is largely white—a seemingly innocent act—they may reinforce a pattern of racial segregation. Simply by sending their children to school—in a system segregated by race and class—they may buttress the walls of separation. Setting up shops or offices in areas not accessible to all races and income levels may strengthen the social context of exclusion. The physical environment now allows racism—defined here as the social and economic oppression of a subject race by a favored one—to become completely unconscious.

As for people in other parts of the world, they should use the case of the United States as a cautionary tale. American cities are not the only ones fragmented by prejudice. Metropolitan areas often reflect drastic distinction by race, class, religion, caste, nationality, or some other artificial delimiter. When such segmentation merely reflects harmless diversity, it requires little or no action. When such segmentation reinforces lack of opportunity or patterns of oppression, it does require action.

Such an urban pattern means that people of conscience will have to become increasingly vigilant in their efforts to promote unity. The spiritual principles of freedom from individual prejudice are a key starting point. Then it will become necessary to take the teachings about free and open association to heart, to seek out those of other races, classes, and creeds, and to refuse to be bound by the political and economic barriers set up by society. It will become imperative to refuse to discriminate and to teach others spiritual truth so that they will refuse to discriminate. It will become important to reach out to the less fortunate, no matter where they live, and to help to carry out the active sharing of wealth needed to eliminate poverty. It will become necessary, that is, to become signs of oneness, so that the world may move closer to the “single-hued pavilion of

the oneness of mankind” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 279).

The Bahá’í teachings suggest that all of this can best be done through spiritual education. Secular attempts to outlaw discrimination and to encourage people to live together have not succeeded. People fight reforms when they seem counter to their own individual well-being; without the moral imperative to reform society, little will exist to do so. But if educated properly in spiritual values, people develop an overwhelming desire to make positive changes in the environment. And so, an act of particular courage and grace is to counter the effects of disunity by teaching others about the beauty of unity. One person cannot change a metropolis, but one person can help change another.

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