

**RACIAL UNITY: AN IMPERATIVE FOR SOCIAL PROGRESS****Author:** Richard W. Thomas, with a foreword by John H. Stanfield III**Published by:** Bahá'í Studies Publications, Ottawa, 1993, xvi + 201 pages

In 1990, the Association for Bahá'í Studies published Richard Thomas's work *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*. This work was evidently well received, as the Association published a revised edition in 1993. Although race prejudice has afflicted most societies in some form across the generations, its perpetuation in the United States throughout the twentieth century has become a major source of community and institutional concern. In addition to causing pangs of regret within American religious and political communities at their roles in the enculturation of slavery during the years of the continent's settlement, the problem of race now threatens the fabric of American society. Legal, political, religious, and philosophic justifications for the separate existence of black and white communities have all been attempted and discarded. It now remains for American society to embrace diversity or to experience prolonged insurgency and the virtual disintegration of any notion of "civil society."

The problem of racism has been addressed in Bahá'í literature throughout the twentieth century. First, the Bahá'í writings are in a sense premised on the theme of oneness of humanity and hence on the elimination of discrimination and prejudice on grounds of race. The universal writings of Bahá'u'lláh on this theme are examined and contextualized in those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, both of whom spoke and wrote at length of America's specific challenges. These warnings, whether in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discourses in North America, or in Shoghi Effendi's 1938 essay *The Advent of Divine Justice*, are fully reviewed in *Racial Unity*, but Thomas's analysis performs a far greater service than rehearsing Bahá'í viewpoints. His thesis is that racial unity is an "imperative for social progress in the modern world" (chapter 1). To persuade the reader that this is so, he explores the foundations of race relations at the time of America's founding and presents the evidence suggesting extensive interracial cooperation in the ancient world. The author also outlines how a steady decline in relations between black and white, based on the articulation of philosophically and religiously suspect, self-serving, Eurocentric worldviews, has cost civilization dearly through overt conflict and missed opportunities to benefit from the development of human capacities.

Thomas's argument is that, despite the damage inflicted on American society by the white supremacist views of such founders as Thomas Jefferson, there has existed throughout American history an "other tradition" in race relations (chapter 7), one which persistently advocated multiracialism and which is currently being articulated with considerable effect and even greater potential, by the Bahá'í community.

*Racial Unity* contributes to the Bahá'í literature on race from a number of standpoints. Building on the approach taken by Gayle Morrison in her biography of Louis Gregory,<sup>1</sup> Thomas explores the struggles experienced within the Bahá'í community, as its diverse membership sought to align their beliefs and actions with the divine principle of racial equality. Early essays by Louis Gregory had reported on interracial amity activities undertaken by the North American Bahá'í community in the 1920s and 1930s,<sup>2</sup> but other essays on race from this time settled for more general expressions of ideals rather than with identification of actual progress and challenges.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Nathan Rutstein has gained wide support for his description of the "spiritual disease" of racism in North America.<sup>4</sup> An earlier essay by Thomas combined elements of personal experience with a desire to present the problem of racism—whether inside the Bahá'í community or beyond it—in historical perspective,<sup>5</sup> and *Racial Unity* similarly includes passages that acknowledge the author's personal involvement in the events being described. The period commencing in the 1960s, in which young black activist Bahá'ís were ultimately able to control their anger and to channel their energies into the progress of the Bahá'í community, appears to have been critical to the community's capacity in the 1990s to implement a social program called "Models of Racial Unity" (as an aside: this reviewer awaits with enthusiasm a study of Alain Locke's relationship with the Bahá'í community, particularly with his status as an early black philosopher increasing rapidly).<sup>6</sup>

1. Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982). This volume emerged out of Morrison's earlier essay, "To Move the World: Promoting Racial Amity, 1920–1927," *World Order* 14.2 (Winter 1980): 9–31.

2. Louis G. Gregory, "Racial Amity," *Bahá'í Yearbook 1925–26*: 165–69; "Inter-Racial Amity," *Bahá'í World 1926–28*: 281–85; "The Races of Men—Many or One?" *Bahá'í World 1928–30*: 330–39; "Racial Amity at Green Acre," *The Bahá'í World 1928–30*: 179–83; "A Significant Inter-Racial Conference," *The Bahá'í World 1928–30*: 175–79; "A Gift to Race Enlightenment," *World Order* 2.1 (April, 1936): 36–39; "Accelerated Progress in Race Relations," *Bahá'í World 1940–44*: 876–80.

3. Genevieve L. Coy, "Seven Candles of Unity: A Symposium. VI Unity of Races," *World Order* 2.12 (March, 1937): 447–51; Herbert Adolphus Miller, "Race and Politics," *World Order* 1.7 (October, 1935): 243–46.

4. Nathan Rutstein, *Healing Racism in America: A Prescription for the Disease* (Springfield, Mass.: Whitcomb, 1993).

5. Richard W. Thomas, "A Long and Thorny Path: Race Relations in the American Bahá'í Community," *Circle of Unity: Bahá'í Approaches to Current Social Issues*, ed. A. A. Lee (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1984) 37–65. This volume contained two additional essays on the issue of race: Carlton E. Brown, "The Continuing Struggle against Racial Injustice in the United States," and June Manning Thomas, "Poverty and Wealth in America: A Bahá'í Perspective."

6. See, for example, J. Washington, *A Journey into the Philosophy of Alain Locke*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994).

In 1992, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States published a statement, "The Vision of Race Unity: America's Most Challenging Issue," and in the years since, race unity activities undertaken by the North American Bahá'í community have attracted considerable media attention.<sup>7</sup> Scholarship on Bahá'í responses to issues of race has expanded.<sup>8</sup> Although *Racial Unity* focuses on North America, the existence of similar problems in such other countries as South Africa is acknowledged (although events there, particularly the dismantling of the apartheid legal regime, have considerably overtaken the text). Racism is a global problem, not exclusively a North American one, and Bahá'í institutions in other countries have conducted education campaigns of their own aimed at mitigating its influence.<sup>9</sup> When Bahá'í communities elsewhere decide to examine their own responses to this vital issue of race unity, they will of necessity turn to Thomas's scholarship for inspiration and example.

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7. E.g., N. Hentoff, "Conversations with Dizzy Gillespie," *Village Voice*, 9 February 1993, vol. 38, p. 18-19; E. Atkins, "Bahá'í Faith Seeks Racial Unity," *Detroit News*, 1 October 1993, sec. B, p. 3, col. 2; B. J. Gilchrist, "Workshop Against Racism Not Just a Religious Event," *Detroit News & Free Press*, 11 December 1993, sec. A, p. 15, col. 1; R. C. Newberry, "Sessions on Racism Had Powerful Effect on Some," *Houston Post*, 25 March 1991, sec. A, p. 15, col. 2; M. Rice, "On How Bahá'ís Live Diversity," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 October 1993, sec. B, p. 4, col. 1; C. Sibley, "One Race, One Earth," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 1 Feb. 1992, sec. XJ, p. 9, col. 1; B. Warren, "Bahá'í Discussion Will Foster Teachings of Racial Harmony," *Times-Picayune*, 12 June 1992, sec. BR, p. 1, col. 4; C. Williams, "Bahá'í Group Brings Races Together to Help Fight Racism," *Detroit News*, 24 June 1994, sec. B, p. 3, col. 2.

8. C. Niland, "Racism and other prejudices as a barrier to peace." *Curriculum Exchange* 4:2 (1986): 54-64; Comp. B. J. Taylor et al., *The Power of Unity: Beyond Prejudice and Racism* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986); K. B. Magill, "The representativeness of racial mix of Bahá'í school attendees in selected geographic areas," (M.S.: National College of Education, 1989). John S. Hatcher, "Racial Identity and the Patterns of Consolation in the Poetry of Robert Hayden," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 3:2 (1990): 35-46; B. J. Taylor, comp. *The Pupil of the Eye: African Americans in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selections from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice* (Riviera Beach, Fla.: Palabra Publications, 1995); June Manning Thomas, "Race Unity: Implications for the Metropolis," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 6:4 (1995): 23-42.

9. See National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of South Africa. "Overcoming Racial Prejudice: South Africa's Most Challenging Issue: A Statement." (1994). The Spiritual Assembly of Houghton; "Aboriginal Reconciliation," (Mona Vale, Australia: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, 1995).