

DIALOGUE ON FAITH AND RACE

convened by

the Office of Public Affairs of
the Bahá'ís of the United States

hosted by

the Peace and Justice Studies Program *and*
the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies *at*
the Catholic University of America

December 12, 2019

at

**the Catholic University of America,
Washington, D.C.**



BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES
OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

THE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
of AMERICA 

The logo for The Catholic University of America, featuring the university's name in a serif font and a small crest to the right.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION TEXT

On March 12, 1967, towards the end of his life, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to a group of local community organizers at Cardoza High School in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, D.C. He had one message to the people there: “prepare to participate” in local activities that would uplift their community. And he wanted those gathered to “tell it wherever you go.”

One of the most pressing questions we face, as we labor to build a new America that is free of racial prejudice and discrimination, is how to continually widen the circle of participation in this work. Such participation is often assumed to include those who visibly signal their commitment to antiracism through a set of prescribed words and actions, while excluding those who do not. It is easy, in this regard, to fall into the conscious or unconscious habit of dividing people into categories such as informed or uninformed, active or inactive, or “with us or against us.” While such thinking can arise out of sincere motives, does it produce unintended consequences that need to be examined? For instance, how might such modes of thought undermine efforts to continually widen the circle of participation?

All people have the latent capacity to participate in processes that enhance the dignity and ensure the just treatment of all. Moreover, social change is not a project that one group of people can carry out for another. All must play their part. Justice for all requires the participation of all. In this regard, participation can be conceived of as a spectrum on which people can move from less active to more active forms of participation. Conceiving of participation in this way requires recognizing that everyone has the capacity to contribute, and such capacity can be increased over time.

There are, of course, many challenges to overcome in this regard. The most obvious of these include active efforts to incite hate, suspicion, division, and mistrust between individuals and communities of varying racial and cultural backgrounds—along with the unconscious internalization of such patterns of thought over generations. Less obvious are the challenges of overcoming apathy, passivity, and complacency, which are bred by many forces in society today.

This does not imply naïveté in the face of oppressive actors and social forces. It implies finding new ways to struggle for justice within that context. Audre Lorde memorably stated, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” In other words, the attitudes, language, methods, and approaches we use to build more just relationships, patterns of behavior, and social structures, matter. New ways of thinking and acting together are needed, in which all can consider themselves as treading a common path toward the betterment of humanity, no matter their background or the obstacles they face. This requires that we learn how to support one another and advance together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide people into categories that alienate or discourage.

As we learn to work in these ways—to construct a new house with new tools—we will encounter many more challenges. It is crucial to persevere in the face of everyday tests, difficulties, setbacks, and misunderstandings. Doing so requires a firm conviction that humanity, in all its diversity, is one, and that we can learn how to build a more just social order together. Consciousness of the oneness of humanity helps shatter the distorting looking glass in which such tests, difficulties, setbacks, and misunderstanding can seem insurmountable.

The principle of the oneness of humanity must be the overarching principle that guides our efforts to overcome racism, along with every other form of injustice and oppression that blights human progress. In an interdependent social body, the well-being of every member and every group depends on the well-being of the entire body.

However, it is one thing to acknowledge something in principle; it is quite another to embrace it with all of one's heart, and harder still to refashion society in ways that give collective expression to it. The difficult work ahead will require perseverance, inclusiveness, and a humble posture of learning. Individual initiative, collective decision-making and planning, and the execution and assessment of plans, must all reflect the conviction that every social group has a unique and vital role to play.

Questions

1. How might the ways we engage people encourage or discourage their ability to participate in the construction of a more just social order?
2. How can we participate in constructive processes of social change based on the conscious application of spiritual principles rather than patterns of thought, speech, and action we have inherited from a divisive and unjust social order?
3. Participation goes beyond how we see our own role within processes of social transformation. It includes how we see the role of those who are different from us in countless ways. What responsibility do we have to foster inclusive participation across lines that previously divided us? What does it look like to have faith in the capacity of others to contribute to the construction of a more just social order?
4. There is undoubtedly a role for constructive criticism in processes of social change. Where might the boundaries lie between forms of criticism that invite reflection and change, and forms that result in discouragement, alienation, or entrenchment? What spiritual principles might guide and inform expressions of criticism?