

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

February 14, 2018

at

**the Office of Public Affairs of
the Bahá'ís of the United States
Washington, D.C.**



BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES
OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION TEXT

The quest for justice has become a defining feature of modern society. As populations around the world have sought to overcome oppression in myriad forms, as the global community has embraced notions of universal human rights, and as humanity has gradually awakened to its deep interconnectedness and interdependence, people of every background have increasingly fixed their sights on justice as the aim of individual striving and of social movements.

The yearning for justice has taken on particular significance in the context of racism within the United States. As Americans struggle with the legacy of centuries of racial subjugation, discrimination, and inequality, and with ongoing abuses, indignities, and marginalization, there is a heightened consciousness of the importance of justice and the need for social change. Yet, dialogue around issues of race is often fraught, not only due to prejudice and ignorance, but also, to some degree, as a result of dichotomous and fragmented thinking around the ways that we, as society, understand justice and its relationship to unity. People of faith, who hold deep spiritual commitments to both justice and unity, may be able to play a unique role in deepening collective understanding of these issues and elevating discourse around concepts of racial justice and racial unity in America.

At the most fundamental level, the human race is one. This truth is affirmed by religion, which teaches us that we are children of the same God, equal in dignity and rights, and by science, which teaches us that we are a single species, inextricably bound together in one planetary homeland. Throughout history, many individuals and groups have sought advantage over others, sowing division and oppression. Yet, our underlying oneness remains a latent truth of human existence. And as humanity has evolved, materially, socially, and spiritually, it has grown in its ability to manifest this truth in social reality. In some sense, the advancement of civilization can be conceived of as progress toward the unity of humankind. Indeed, if humanity is a single people, with shared interests and aspirations, its well-being can be achieved only through true unity. But true unity is possible only with justice.

It may be helpful at this juncture to give further shape to our conceptions of both justice and unity.

Justice is undoubtedly of paramount importance. It is a cornerstone of all faith traditions, a primary value in every great civilization, and a vital element of the functioning of society. It is a profound and capacious concept that humanity is still seeking to understand and actualize. Justice is also multifaceted, often understood differently in different arenas, such as criminal justice, including retributive and restorative justice, social justice, including economic, environmental, and political justice, and the like. Yet, all expressions of justice, at their root, share core features.

Justice is a spiritual principle, which manifests at both the individual and collective level. At the individual level, it is a faculty of the human soul that enables each person to see things with his or her own eyes, to be free from prejudice and blind adherence to tradition, to distinguish truth from falsehood, to be fair-minded in one's judgment, and to treat others with equity. And each and every human being has the capacity to discern, express, and embody justice in this way. At the collective level, justice promotes concern for the well-being, inclusion, and participation of all, enables groups to overcome perennial tendencies toward manipulation and partisanship, and allows for collective decision-making through participatory and consultative processes that respect the opinions of all and take account of the best interests of all. In a sense, justice is the practical expression of the awareness that, in the achievement of human progress, the interests of the individual and of society are inextricably linked.

Unity is also a deep, challenging, and often misunderstood concept. It may first be helpful to clarify what unity is not: it is not uniformity, nor is it erasure of diverse and intersecting identities. Throughout history, superficial, misguided, and even malicious calls for unity have been used to silence people, to deny lived identities and experiences, and to strengthen the position of those in power. Certainly, none of these efforts are animated by a true spirit of unity, nor do they advance unity in practice.

In a sense, the body of humanity can be likened to a human body, composed of diverse and specialized cells and organs. These parts cannot live apart from the body, and the well-being of each derives from the well-being of the whole. At the same time, the unity and interdependence of the entire body permits the full realization of the distinctive capacities of each member. This organic unity does not, however, imply uniformity, as the diversity of the component members is what enables the body to realize its collective capacity. So it is with human societies, where unity in diversity contributes to prosperity and well-being. Thus, unity is a state of collectivity in which each member is valued and contributes, diversity is honored as a source of strength and beauty, and the well-being of the part and the well-being of the whole are mutually reinforcing.

With these concepts in mind, it becomes clear that justice and unity go hand in hand. There can be no true unity without justice, as justice is a necessary and integral component of true unity. When justice is present, unity can be established. In a state of unity, the distinctive identities of individuals and groups are recognized and affirmed, and this recognition and affirmation rests on a shared understanding of the broader human identity common to all people. Justice ensures that every individual and group is treated fairly, and that all have the opportunity to develop their full potential in order to contribute to the betterment of society. It is the means by which unity of thought and action can be achieved and sustained among diverse peoples. Indeed, the purpose of justice is to achieve unity.

By the same token, justice, if it is to be true to the reality of human oneness, must be pursued in ways that are conducive to the ultimate goal of unity. When justice is framed as oppositional struggle, in which human beings are pitted against one another, it creates division within the human family and denies our underlying oneness. Seeking justice for one individual or group at the expense of another individual or group can tear at the social fabric and hinder the collective and sustainable realization of both justice and unity.

Likewise, when justice is the sole aim of individual or collective efforts, and is divorced from considerations of unity, baser emotions, such as vengeance and vindictiveness, may begin to masquerade as justice. Justice is a spiritual quality, and spiritual qualities do not work in isolation, but interact with each other. Thus, justice must be tempered by other spiritual qualities, such as compassion and love – lest the quest for justice itself become oppressive.

For both moral and practical reasons, means must be consistent with ends. In recent years, scholars of social change have begun to confirm that means prefigure ends: the more inclusive and cooperative a movement for justice, the more open and participatory the political structures that ultimately emerge. True justice cannot be achieved through unjust means. In this sense, justice is, like unity, both a goal and an operating principle – and given their interdependence, justice and unity must be pursued together as both means and as ends.

In this connection, we may consider framing the quest for justice not as oppositional or divisive struggle, but rather as collective struggle, in which humanity is engaged together – seeking to overcome ignorance, to transcend the forces of division and destruction, and to establish truth and equity. This is not to say that we cannot

oppose certain ideas, structures, and forces that are unjust; we most certainly can and should. But opposing one another as fellow human beings presents a danger: the oppressed may find themselves taking on the characteristics of the oppressor, responding in ways that reproduce the same dynamics of dehumanization and othering that they have suffered. In the struggle for justice, how can we ensure that our means are as pure as our ends, and that they model the inclusion and mutuality we are seeking?

There is much to be learned regarding how we can overcome injustice together, inviting others in to join us as co-workers in this struggle, and empowering each other to improve ourselves and our society. Indeed, justice demands universal participation, as each of us has the potential to be an agent of change and each of us can take ownership of the struggle to better ourselves and our society. We are all protagonists in a process of learning, growth, discovery, and progress – one that can lead to the ultimate realization of the unity of humanity. And, as we begin to understand justice and unity in harmony with one another, we can imagine a dialectic and iterative process, whereby justice and unity build upon one another to advance civilization.

In the context of an increasingly polarized, difficult, and urgent national conversation on race, narrow and reductive conceptions of justice often prevail, with justice being conceived of in self-righteous and condemnatory ways. Similarly, unity is often understood in facile ways, either used as a tool to avoid confronting harsh realities or else dismissed out of hand as an irrelevant ideal. Undoubtedly, our society can benefit from a more evolved understanding of justice and unity.

Faith communities can make significant contributions to advancing this understanding, given our deep experience striving for justice and unity in our own communities and in wider society; our awareness of the reciprocal relationship between individuals and society, and the need for transformation of both hearts and minds and social systems; and the nexus between being and doing, as we constantly seek coherence in our thoughts, prayers, attitudes, speech, and actions. In navigating and engaging with a fractious and challenging dialogue on race and racism in America, we may wish to consider how we can offer valuable perspectives that can help to promote more effective and sustainable action to achieve racial justice and racial unity.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some examples – in our own lives and/or in society – of how justice and unity interact?
2. How do our scriptures and our traditions teach us faith-based conceptions of justice and unity that are expansive and nuanced?
3. What spiritual qualities can we bring to bear in promoting both justice and unity to overcome racism?
4. How can we as people of faith contribute to an evolving understanding of the interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationship between justice and unity?